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**Lifestyle migrants: an empirical study and insight  
into the other type of 'expat' in Kunming, P.R. China**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Personal approach

I first arrived in Kunming in August 2009 to study Chinese at Yunnan University for two semesters. Despite my great interest in China's culture and its people, and the eagerness to master the language, I soon found myself spending most of my time and sharing an apartment with other international, mostly Western, students. Most afternoons were spent in Western-owned cafés close by the university campus, popular amongst Kunming's foreign population as well as young locals. After a couple of weeks I was familiar with the majority of the other international students, who for the most part were in their twenties, and realized that there was also another "type" of Western foreigners that frequented this area on a daily basis. These people, mainly men between 30 and 50 years, usually gathered in front of *Salvador's Coffee House* in the late afternoon, I rarely saw them interacting with Chinese, except for the *fuwuyuan*<sup>1</sup> of the bar.

Since the international student population was quite big and we shared the same goal of learning the language and daily routine, with classes starting at 8:30 in the morning and finishing at noon, we took comfort in our own sort of community. Few sought contacts with the so-called expatriates<sup>2</sup>, to which we often just referred to as "the people at Salvador's". In the course of the two semesters, though, we wound up getting to know some of them, regularly engaging in conversations when going out. Still, the main social interactions of the foreign students seemed to take place within the student community, and that of the expatriates within their own expatriate community. Interactions with locals were more or less reduced to daily encounters with sale assistants, restaurant staff, taxi drivers and language teachers. These western cafés are also frequented by many young locals looking for language partners and friends; while in the beginning we were keen to meet them, these kind of contacts slowly declined in the course of the stay. I have to mention at this point

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<sup>1</sup> *Fuwuyuan* is Chinese and means waiter or waitress. The term is frequently used amongst foreigners when referring to the waitresses employed in Western cafés and bars. I am using the transcribing system *Hanyu Pinyin* for the Chinese words I use in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I will discuss the term later in this chapter. Throughout this paper I will use both the term expatriate as well as its abbreviated form expat.

that this does not apply for all foreign students, but is merely based on my own experience and observations.

I returned to Kunming in August 2010, two months after my study year had ended, to extend my stay for a few months. Most of my friends had left Kunming by then and I was more or less forced to establish a new network of social relationships. Since most Western students only stay for a semester or two, by the beginning of September the body of the student community had completely changed, unveiling its transient nature to me. Throughout the ten months I had already spent there, I constantly got to meet new people and had seen hundreds of new faces, slowly establishing a social network; I found myself tired of going through this procedure again and was seeking contact with people who had been staying there for a while already. I could not share the excitement of those who had just arrived and to whom everything was new; yet, contacts with members of the expatriate community stayed on a very superficial level and were limited to small talk conversations. After returning back home in October I started to reflect on the experiences I had collected during my stay and started to question the dynamics of and within Kunming's foreign population: Why do people, who move there temporarily or even permanently and seem to have great interest in China and learning Chinese, wind up spending most of their time with others who share a similar cultural background? What boundaries are drawn between the Chinese locals and the foreign community, and within the foreign community itself? How do those who stay long term handle the fact that people are coming and going? What puzzled me most, though, was: Who are these expatriates and what led to their decision to settle in Kunming (at least for a while), given their apparent indifference to the Chinese environment?

After I had left Kunming and returned to Vienna I started to look into studies on expatriates and expatriate communities. The academic concern with expatriates primarily focuses on professionals working for international companies outside their native country, dealing with the lack of integration and acculturation in the host society as well as their spatial separation and social segregation (Kreutzer & Roth 2006:10). The lack of interest shown by expatriates in the host country's culture, language and people, can often be explained by the fact that they are sent abroad, thus their decision to move there is not an entirely voluntary one. Although I had already known at this point that this doesn't necessarily apply to the majority of the

members of Kunming's expatriate community, I was able to identify apparent parallels between them and the expatriates and their communities characterized in these accounts.

Another reason for my growing interest in this topic was the fact that even though anthropologists have studied people of their own color, little research has been made on expatriates (Fechter 2007:1). In 1968, Crocombe already marks:

“Had people with such exotic costumes, such irrational beliefs, such complex social organizations, and such tremendous power, been of any other skin colour they would have been studied in great depth and detail by anthropologists from all over the world. Unfortunately however, most of the world's anthropologists are white, and it is a rare anthropologist indeed who studies somebody of his own colour.” (Crocombe 1968: 76, quoted in Cohen 1977:5)

While reading through a number of studies on expatriate communities and their (lack of) integration into the host societies, I came to the decision that the study of Kunming's expatriate community would make an interesting contribution to this field. The focus of the study continually changed during the course of research. Before my arrival my research questions attached great importance to the “we” and the “other” dichotomy, assuming that the geographical separation and social segregation is primarily a result of a general discontent with the Chinese environment, leading to its rejection and the generation of anti-Chinese attitudes towards it. Also I assumed that most expatriates were somehow sent to Kunming and so showed little interest in learning the language. Soon after I had started with my fieldwork, I found out that my assumptions were short-sighted. The expatriates' relationships with the Chinese locals were far more complex and the migration itself, as well as the relationships held within the expatriate community is of much greater importance than I had assumed. During the first weeks of participant observation and a few interviews the focus became clearer and I had developed the following research questions:

- What are the reasons for the expatriates to move to Kunming or to leave it again?
- How do expatriates in Kunming organize their lives in the new cultural environment?
- In which ways do they interact with the Chinese environment and integrate in it?

- What spatial and social boundaries exist between the expatriates and the Chinese locals?
- What is the predominant attitude towards the Chinese environment within the expatriate community and in what way is it influenced by the behavior of the locals towards them?

### 1.1. Theoretical approach

During the last decade expats and expat communities have increasingly been the subject of research in various disciplines (see Cohen 1977, 1984; Fechter 2007; Iredale 200; Malewski 2005). None of them, however, seemed sufficient to explain the life of expats in Kunming. In order to answer my research questions, I thus follow Karen O'Reilly's approach in her ethnography of British lifestyle migrants in Spain:

"As a social anthropological study [...] theorizing remains close to the interpretations and to the particular study rather than appearing as abstractions from the study. [...] I do not bring the study to a theory or topic; I bring concepts and theories to the study." (O'Reilly 2000:9)

This means that I will not apply or try to verify a single theory to the study, but will draw from different ones to explain certain actions, occurrences and behaviors (Ibid.:10).

The intention of this paper is to contribute to the study of expatriates, "privileged migration", and lifestyle migration embedded in the broader field of transnationalism. As I will show later, many expatriates move for the reason of a more convenient or pleasant way of living, I will be drawing approaches from the theories of lifestyle migration. First, I will outline the term "expatriate" and the reason I use it. After that I will give an introduction to the fields that build the theoretical frame of the study.

### 1.1.1. Expatriate

Western foreigners living in Kunming usually speak of themselves as foreigner, *laowai*<sup>3</sup>, Westerner and expat. The latter might not be the most frequently used term; I will nevertheless adopt it to refer to those who had been staying in Kunming for at least a year in total at the time of my research. The term expatriate derives from the Latin language and literally translates as “out of the fatherland”, merely describing a person that lives outside their native country. Due to the different conceptualizations and applications in the course of history, the term expatriate, however, carries a variety of notions that significantly distinguishes the people it refers to from other migrants. Nowadays, “the term is conventionally reserved for Westerners who have lived abroad for varying lengths of time, especially artists, colonials, and generally those with a mission of one kind or another.” (Cohen 1977:6) Popular imaginations of expatriates are dominated by characterization of them being wealthy, egoistical and ignorant; living in luxurious mansions with their families in designated areas, regularly attending expatriate club meetings and essentially avoiding any contact with their host society, apart from their servants and local elites (Fechter 2007:1).

After Erik Cohen’s article on “Expatriate Communities” in 1977, the concept of expatriates had long been neglected (Fechter 2007:17). Over the last decade it has been given more attention by scholars of different academic fields (see Farrer 2010; Fechter 2005, 2007; Iredale 2001) and has undergone notable change. The most prevalent use of the term nowadays is likely the one deriving from the field of human resource management, connected to the concept of “business expats” – professionals sent abroad by their companies, provided with an “expatriate package” that includes a pay rise and covers all their and their family’s expenses. This term is also employed to the growing number of young professionals keen on gaining international work experience (Fechter 2007:2). Recent studies as well as media representations have gone away from this narrow concept of the expatriates, and have frequently been using the term in connection with people who voluntarily migrate to another country. Since these are often Western people moving to less affluent parts of the world in comparison with their native country, the term is still “accompanied by associations of luxury, leisure and moral decline abroad, in

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<sup>3</sup> The literal meaning of the word *laowai* is “old” (*lao*) and “foreign/ outside” (*wai*). It is commonly used by Chinese people when addressing or referring to Western foreigners.

historical as well as contemporary contexts.” (Ibid.:3) Another major characteristic of expatriates is the transient nature of their stay; they generally move abroad with the perspective of moving and/or returning home after a couple of years. According to Erik Cohen (1977:6) the concept of expatriate fills in the gap between tourists and (semi-) permanent international migrants. Although they are likely to leave the host country again, it is not possible to tell expatriates from other prospective migrants (Ibid.:14). As one can see, the term expatriate is a very loose one, accompanied by a range of different assumptions and expectations; yet, I have chosen to use this term for several reasons. Firstly, it is prevalent across the globe and understood by people speaking different languages. The community, in which my research took place, is made up by people of different nationalities; it therefore makes sense to adopt this term for its members. As I have mentioned before, other terms besides “expatriate” frequently used by the members of the community to refer to themselves are “foreigner” and “*laowai*”. I decided against utilizing these terms, since the community includes people that are ethnically Chinese, born in China (or even in Kunming), but have spent most of their lives in Western countries; yet many of them are holding the Chinese citizenship and it therefore would not be right to subsume them under the term “foreigner”. I also decided against using “*laowai*”, as it is more commonly used by Chinese people referring to Western foreigners of white skin colour, than by foreigners themselves and again excludes those of Chinese or other Asian ethnic background. The second reason, I employ the term expatriate is the broadness of the concept; it “allows for the discussion of a heterogeneous group of people, or places, without having to assume that they share a fixed set of ‘group characteristics’” (Fechter 2007:6). I will therefore use the concept as an analytical tool, drawn on the definition of Ulf Hannerz (1996:106), who identifies expatriates as people who voluntarily move abroad for a while and are in the position to go back home whenever they want to. With regard to other kinds of transnational migrants their incessant possibility to leave should thus be emphasised as one indication of their relatively privileged status within international migration. As this study will show, the transient nature of expatriates also reflects on their relationship with the Chinese locals.

### 1.1.2. Privileged Migration

In “Going first class? New Approached to Privileged Travel and Movement” (2007), Vered Amit identifies two commonalities among the studies on privileged movement: the movement is voluntary and those who move have enough resources (e.g. money, time, credentials) to travel. Yet, they are not members of the most powerful elites (Amit 2007:2). Kunming’s expatriates also seem to fit this characterization. Their privileged status mainly arises out of comparison with majority of China’s population. There are big discrepancies with regard to resources amongst them; even though most cannot exactly be considered rich, expatriates are still relatively affluent compared with the majority of the local population. Money is not the only resource that accounts for their privilege; others are time, the hassle-free crossing of borders and what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as “cultural capital”<sup>4</sup>. I argue that the overall reason for their privilege is nevertheless the fact that they are able to choose where they want to live and for how long. The decision to move is usually connected to an expected improvement and some sort of enrichment in life.

### 1.1.3. Lifestyle Migration

The phenomenon of transnational movement as a means of searching for a better way of life and the resulting blurring of tourism and migration has found its academic approach in the fairly new field of “lifestyle migration” (see Benson 2009, 2011; Casado-Díaz 2011; Huber 2003; Korpela 2010; O’Reilly 2000, 2003; O’Reilly & Benson 2009). Many studies dealing with this phenomenon are concerned with inner-European migration of British nationals. It is hence important to point out that lifestyle migrants can also be found in other parts of the world and hold different nationalities (Korpela 2009:17). In order to explain the expatriates’ motivations leading to their decision to move, I will be drawing from the major concepts and theories of this field and categorize them as “lifestyle migrants”.

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<sup>4</sup> I will enlarge on this later in Chapter 6.

In her account of British nationals residing temporarily or permanently residing on the Spanish Costa de la Sol, Karen O'Reilly gives a characterization of this migration type:

"It cannot be characterised as migration, refugee migration or asylum seeking. It is essentially voluntarily (though some individuals would dispute this personally) and perhaps mildly economic motivation; but more that migrants are moving for a better way of life, to the sun, to a place they are familiar with and feel comfortable in, away from somewhere they sometimes feel less comfortable." (O'Reilly 2000:67)

As I will further demonstrate in the third chapter of this paper, this definition somehow applies to the majority of the members of Kunming's expatriate community. It should be emphasized that migration, although denied by many migrants, is a great deal about escape (O'Reilly & Benson 2009:3). They escape *from* home for various reasons, such as unemployment, monotony, dead-end jobs, or the discontent with their own society, and escape *to* a place where they can start a new and hope to be able to make their lives more meaningful (Ibid.:3f).

Lifestyle migrants do not randomly choose their destinations, but "they rely on long histories of prior engagements and reflect wider cultural imaginings about places." (Ibid.:6) While lifestyle migrants typically reject being identified as such, the transition from being a tourist to becoming a migrant is often a smooth one (Torkington 2010:100). In the case of Kunming, most had been there before as backpackers or Chinese language students, and either "got stuck" or came to the decision to move there after they had left for a while. In Chapter 2, I will show that Kunming has certain particularities that distinguish it from many other places in China and give rise to the general acceptance of Kunming being a convenient and enjoyable place for living. I will also display that the members of the expatriate community have developed a personal bonding to the city, typical for lifestyle migrants who chose places that inherent a certain potential for self-realization (O'Reilly & Benson 2009:6).

#### 1.1.4. Transnationalism

The concepts of lifestyle migration and expatriates can best be understood within the broader idea of *transnationalism*. The focus of this academic field is on the cultural, political and social relationships, linkages and networks crossing national borders

and build a connection between specific places (Pries 2008:13). Vertovec (2009:3) clarifies that while interactions between governments are considered “international”, the notion “transnational” is used to describe linkages between business, NGOs and individuals. Due to new technologies and significant developments in the fields of transport and communications, these facilitate the overcoming of great geographical distances and the maintenance intensification of connections, relationships and networks around the world (Pries 2008:9; Vertovec 2009:3). The movement between places that lie far away from each other has become a normal part of many people’s lives; the term transnationalism “provides an umbrella concept for some of the most globally transformative processes and developments of our time.”(Vertovec 2009:12)

In 1992 Glick Schiller *et al.* already noted that the conceptions of migrant and immigrant are no longer sufficient for describing the recent development in movement and migration. In their comprehension, the term immigrant bears connotations of abandoning old patterns and trying to assimilate into a new cultural environment. The transmigrant, on the other side, acquires knowledge and competences of two different societies and compounds them into a single social arena, maintaining several different identities bonding them to more than one nation (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992:1; Hannerz 1996:11). This does not simply lead to a „delocalisation“, but can promote the perception that one’s own lifestyle, culture and language are only one of a variety of possibilities (Pries 2008:30). Another characteristic that differentiates transmigrants from migrants (whose migration is generally permanent and is often aiming at a change in citizenship) is the transient nature of their stay. While according to Glick-Schiller *et al.* (1992:1f) transmigrants’ actions and identities are characterized by their simultaneous connection to two or more societies, Kreutzer and Roth (2006:7) claim the experience of changing places and regularly settling in a nation for a limited amount of time forms as the central part in the lives of transmigrants.

“People live in and create a new social and cultural space which calls for a new awareness of who they are, a new consciousness, and new identities.” (Hannerz 1996:14) In the context of expatriates this means a continuous transition between their own culture and that of their host society on the one hand, and on the other being relatively autonomous to both of them. As a result, it is very likely that they develop a “third, transnational culture”, a mixture of different cultures that is often

highly influenced by the dominant Anglo-American culture (Kreutzer & Roth 2006:23).<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2. Methodical approach

The empiric part of my thesis is based on participant observations, nine semi-structured interviews<sup>6</sup> and several informal conversations carried out over a three month period between August and November 2011. The interviews were conducted with ten informants, originating from seven different nations<sup>7</sup>, of which four were in their twenties, two in their thirties, three in their forties and one over fifty years old. They had been living in Kunming for a period of one to eight years; all of them had at least visited the city before they decided to settle, and had previously been living in other parts of China. Most interviews took place in Western cafés on *Wenlin Jie* and *Wenhua Xiang*<sup>8</sup>, some in mine or my informant's apartments. The majority of my informants were English teachers, respectively IELTS<sup>9</sup> examiners; others were bar owners, working for foreign companies or studying. I decided to include students as well, since one had been living in Kunming for four years already and the other had worked for a foreign company before he quit and decided to attend Chinese classes; neither of them had any plans to leave Kunming in the near future. I focused my research on white, "Western" expatriates since they are sharing experiences in China that in many ways differ from those who are of Asian or African ethnic background.

The inclusion criteria for my interviews were for people who held a citizenship of a Western country and had lived in Kunming for at least 12 months at the time of the interview and had no intention of leaving in the near future. Four of my informants replied to an announcement posted on the expat forum *GoKunming*; the others were

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<sup>5</sup> This will be illustrated in Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> The interviews were conducted in English, and apart from one recorded and fully transcribed, I have corrected strong language mistakes in the speech patterns.

<sup>7</sup> Australia, Canada, Finland, Italy, Netherlands, Russia, UK.

<sup>8</sup> The street of *Wenlin Jie* and the adjacent alley *Wenhua Xiang* are commonly referred to as "foreigner street" by the locals as well as the expat population. They are located in between Kunming's largest universities and are home to a variety of foreign-owned restaurants, cafés and bars. I will further introduce them in the following chapter.

<sup>9</sup> International English Language Testing System

either found through mutual contacts or simply addressed by me at their work place or at Western bars, where also most of the participant observation and informal conversations took place. As Kathleen M. DeWalt and Billie R. DeWalt have pointed out “participant observation is a way to collect data in naturalistic settings by ethnographers who observe/or take part in the common and uncommon activities of the people being studied.” (DeWalt and Dewalt 2000:2) In order to depict the different levels on which participation can take place, DeWalt and Dewalt (2002:19f) have modified the typology developed by James Spradley (1980) describing the “degree of participation” of the ethnographer - the continuum goes from *nonparticipation*, *passive participation*, *moderate participation*, *active participation* to *complete participation*. Thanks to my previous stay it was relatively easy to get in contact with Kunming’s expatriates. Some still remembered me from before and a few of my former university colleagues had decided to stay and turned into expatriates as well. I therefore had never been a pure observer (that does not actively or only occasionally interact with the people being studied) and thus started my research at the level of *active participation*, engaging in most activities of everyday life within the expatriate community (Ibid.:20) This not only included regular visits to Western cafés and bars on *Wenlin Jie*, but also joining them for so-called “monkey shows”<sup>10</sup>. By doing so, I slowly became a member of the community, reaching the level of *complete participation*. Towards the end of my stay I was frequently asked whether I’m going to include myself as well in my thesis, since I am now an expatriate as well. DeWalt and DeWalt (2002:22) stress that while the “degree of participation” and “level of membership” is depending on the research and the community, “the balance between observation and participation achieved by an individual researcher can fall anywhere along the continuum [...] [and the researcher] should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectations that are being made at any particular place along the continuum.” (Ibid.:23) The balance between observation and participation as well as the researcher’s role within the community is primarily chosen by the researcher, but can be influenced by several factors, like personal characteristics (Ibid.: 25). During my research, it was primarily my age, gender and nationality that prevented me from taking on *complete participation* in certain groups of the expatriate community, for example gatherings of male native

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<sup>10</sup> Kunming’s expatriates often refer to overly well-paid modeling jobs and music gigs that they are offered on the sheer fact of origin and looks, as “monkey shows”. I will further discuss this in Chapter 6.

English speakers in their 30s to 50s or expatriates from different Spanish speaking countries that kept switching back to their mother tongue in the course of conversation. As a result, the degree of participation and my participating role shifted depending on whom I was with. Atkinson (2007:4) explains that even in settings where the ethnographer is already a participant, the researcher's role underlies constant negotiation with those being studied. In the course of research the ethnographer not only has to determine his/her role in the community, but also has to decide whether the research should be overt or covert. I was overt about my research right from the beginning and mostly received positive reactions when I told about the intentions of my stay. People generally seemed to ignore my role as a researcher; but every now and then, almost out of the blue, they would ask me to take or to not take down something they were saying, or, when I was just text messaging, wondered if I was taking notes. Being an accepted member of the community on one hand and a researcher studying them on the other, my role in the community was in a constant state of flux. Most of the time I took the role of an active participant and community member, fully engaging in their activities and conversations; on certain occasions though I switched to the role of a pure observer. For example, when I was engaged in a discussion of particular interest for my research I held back my personal opinions trying not to affect the direction of the conversation.

## 2. Setting the scene

### 2.1. Geographical and historical context

山高皇帝远 *shan gao huangdi yuan* – “The mountains are high and the emperor is far away”. This Chinese proverb is often used to describe the province of Yunnan. Located in the far Southwest of China, bordering Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, as well as the Chinese provinces Guangxi, Guizhou Sichuan and Tibet, it is on the edge of the traditionally Han-controlled areas. Due to its geographic position, its mountainous terrain and its ethnic diversity China’s sixth biggest province, spans 394,000 km<sup>2</sup>; it was only until last century that any government was able to secure its political loyalty. Yunnan houses twenty-five of China’s fifty-six recognized nationalities<sup>11</sup>. After Xinjiang, it has the second most among the provinces and autonomous regions of China. According to the latest census of 2010 thirty-three percent of the 45,966 million registered residents are members of ethnic minorities.<sup>12</sup>

For centuries, and to some extent even today, Yunnan and its people have been considered as backward, uncivilised and hard to govern. Its history goes back over 2,000 years but it wasn’t until the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, after the invasion of the Mongols and the founding of the Yuan Dynasty, that it was fully integrated into the Chinese empire as the province of Yunnan. Kunming, which had been an important city on the ancient South-western Silk Road, was chosen as the capital of the newly annexed territory (Unger and Unger 2001:15ff).

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the European colonial powers started to show significant interest in Yunnan. France and Great Britain, especially, who were establishing themselves in the regions of Indochina and Burma, were keen to exploit the region’s abundant resources. While the British soon lost their interest, the French invested a huge amount of money -building a railway starting at the Vietnamese harbour of Haiphong, passing Hanoi and continuing all the way up to Kunming (Unger and Unger 2001:17). French missionaries explored much of the province, built

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<sup>11</sup> The Chinese government officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups, referring to them as 民族 *mínzú* – “nationalities”. Over 90 % of China’s population was classified as Han Chinese.

<sup>12</sup> [http://gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2220/yunnan\\_census\\_results\\_released](http://gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2220/yunnan_census_results_released) (accessed February 13, 2012)

churches and introduced coffee beans and grapes, to which Yunnan's coffee and wine industries owe their origins<sup>13</sup>.

During World War II Yunnan went through an enormous transformation, when the Japanese invasion forced many factories and refugees to relocate from the east coast. The remote province became an important centre of resistance against the Japanese forces and assumed great strategic significance thanks to the construction of the Burma Road, a crucial supply line for armament. In early 1942, after the Japanese had taken over Burma, Kunming continued to receive most of the incoming aid brought by US planes. To get there, they had to fly the dangerous mission of crossing the 5,000 metres high mountain range between India and Yunnan, referred to as the 'Hump'. In the course of these events the face of the rather sleepy little town with a population of 150,000, had been radically altered. The surge of 60,000 refugees, displaced by the Japanese invasion of the east coast, in 1937, followed by the construction of several housing projects and widening of the streets, thus marked the beginning of a development that has made Kunming one of the most important cities in China's southwest. With universities like Yunnan University and Yunnan Normal University it is also the major intellectual centre leading the regions research and development (Unger and Unger 2001:18).

Given its location south of the lofty Tibetan plateau, Yunnan has been reputed as "South of the clouds" (Yan 2006:x). Situated in a mountainous area with altitudes ranging from 76.4 to 6,740 metres, it is hard to accommodate the range of different microclimates that are found throughout the province and so is officially defined as "subtropical highland monsoon". While temperatures drop down to -20°C in winter in the North and soar to over 30°C in summer in the South, Central Yunnan's weather conditions are generally mild. Kunming lies on the central plateau on 1890 metres altitude and is often described as "City of Eternal Spring" because of its mild and fairly even climate all year round (Mansfield 2007:4).

Yunnan is often considered to be China's most beautiful province, due to its geographical, biological and ethnical diversity. This prevalent reception is also

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[www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/636/yunnans\\_ethnic\\_minorities\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_qing\\_dynasty](http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/636/yunnans_ethnic_minorities_at_the_end_of_the_qing_dynasty)  
(accessed on February 12,2012)

supported by the authors of the popular travel guide “Lonely Planet”, who state in the introduction of the chapter about Yunnan:

“We’ve said it before and we’ll say it again: if you have time for but one province in China, Yúnnán should be it. Strong words but hyperbole is remarkably understated when describing Yúnnán. No other province can rival Yúnnán’s diversity in land and people. Guìzhōu is also an ethnic mosaic, Sìchuān’s rivers garner much of the Southwest’s glory and Guǎngxī’s scenery leaps from every encyclopedia’s entry on China. Yet Yúnnán can top ‘em all.” (Lonely Planet China’s Southwest 2007:216)

Not only have travellers been drawn to this province that is also regarded as one of China’s most relaxed and bureaucracy-free, many of the Chinese that were banished there during the Cultural Revolution refused to return home after their “rehabilitation”<sup>14</sup>.

For a long time the Central Government has neglected the Western regions in favour of the economic and industrial development that was mainly concentrated on the east coast and the Pearl Delta. Still, as one of China’s rather undeveloped regions, mainly depending on agriculture, Yunnan has made great economic progress during the past decades and has become the nation’s biggest producer of tobacco and Asia’s biggest export base for fresh flowers. The latter has been attracting more and more foreign businesses to set up companies in this region. Another leading key economic sector is tourism; the (“authentically” rebuilt) historic towns of Dali, Lijiang and Shangri-la<sup>15</sup> and the different ethnic groups’ cultures, being put on display, draws millions and millions of Chinese and foreign tourists (Unger und Unger 2001:15).

The hosting of the International Horticultural Exposition in 1999 was part of the effort to promote tourism in Kunming. Since then the city has become a popular destination for both Chinese and foreign tourists; in 2006 received 22.4 million visitors, of which 21.7 million were domestic and 707,500 foreign visitors<sup>16</sup>. Besides having several cultural and historic sites, Kunming owes its popularity mainly to its reputation as “Spring City” and to its convenient location for travelling around Yunnan and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, with a population of, by Chinese standards, only 6,432,212, it is considered to be China’s most “laid-back” and “relaxed” capital.

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<sup>14</sup> From 1968, young urban intellectuals were sent to the country-side to gain “reeducation” by working alongside peasants, with no date of return.

<sup>15</sup> Formally called 中甸 *Zhongdian*, it was renamed in 2001 after the fictional land of Shangri-la in James Hilton’s novel “Lost Horizon” (1933) to promote tourism.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.echinacities.com/kunming/business-guide/economic-overview/strategic-industries.html> (accessed January 13,2012)



## 2.2. Foreigners in Kunming

Foreigners are not only drawn to Yunnan to visit; more and more decide to settle there for a certain period of time, some even for good. At the end of 2010, 47,396 foreign nationals, including residents from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, were counted to be living, working and studying in Yunnan. No data has been published revealing how many foreigners are currently residing in Kunming, nor how many come from non-Asian countries. It can be assumed, though, that the majority are Kunming residents; other places with a significant foreign population are Dehong Dai, Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Lincang, etc.<sup>17</sup> Owing to this lack of information, a discussion thread had been started on the online forum GoKunming concerning the expat population of the capital; the definition of expat that is being used excludes any tourists, but includes foreign students studying for at least a year, those gainfully employed as well as retirees. Estimations range from 1,300 up to 40,000, out of which the majority is assumed to be nationals of Thailand and the Republic of Korea.<sup>18</sup> During my research, there were many discussions evolving around this question; most of the long-term expats reckoned that there is a total of 4,000 – 7,000 Western foreigners currently living in Kunming. Due to the lack of information, the following illustration of the expat community is mainly based on my own observations, which I have discussed with members of the community on several occasions. Since most of my informants have been living in Kunming for many years, I consider their opinions on the expat community as *expert views*. The description of Kunming's expat community is thus based on the information my informants have given during the interviews, as well as my own observations.

The majority of the foreigners residing in Kunming are international students studying at the two key universities *Yunnan Daxue* (Yunnan University) and *Yunnan Shifan Daxue* (Yunnan Normal University), or other language institutes that are entitled to issue student visas. Most of them stay for only one or two semesters and tend to stick together; although the two universities are located

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<sup>17</sup> [http://en.kunming.cn/index/content/2011-05/10/content\\_2520991.htm](http://en.kunming.cn/index/content/2011-05/10/content_2520991.htm) (accessed February 13,2012)

<sup>18</sup> [http://gokunming.com/en/forums/thread/2887/expat\\_population\\_in\\_kunming](http://gokunming.com/en/forums/thread/2887/expat_population_in_kunming) (accessed January 14,2012)

within a 15 minutes walking distance, I have observed relatively little social interaction between their students.

Since most of these students only stay for a short time they are generally not considered to be part of the expat community. In his article on expatriate communities Erik Cohen (1977) alludes to four, not mutually exclusive purposes, for foreigners to live abroad. The first is *business*, including private entrepreneurs, managers and employees of foreign and multinational firms, foreign employees of local firms as well as professionals practicing abroad. The second purpose, he mentions, is *mission* and applies mainly to diplomatic and other governmental representatives, foreign aid personnel, military stationed abroad as well as missionaries. Motivations of academics, scientists and artists to live abroad are summarised as *teaching, research and culture*. The fourth purpose he mentions is leisure, a broad notion that includes owners of second homes, retirees living abroad, bohemians, drop-outs and other 'permanent tourists'. (Cohen 1977:6) While all of the purposes are drawing people to Kunming, as I will demonstrate in the third chapter, the core and most visible part of the community is made up by expats that are here for the purpose that Cohen identifies as *leisure*. Steve, a young Canadian, who has been staying in Shanghai for a while before he came to Kunming in 2010, told me about his impressions of the expats in these two cities:

*I felt in Shanghai the amount of foreigners was higher educated or from a lot more prestigious universities, whether travelling or working, whereas in Kunming I've met a lot of them that are just very laid-back, a lot of them don't even have a degree and perhaps, I suspect, people that didn't make it that successful back home and come here to Kunming to relax, enjoy, do hiking, travelling, you know, looking for a sort of new world, sort of a utopian kind of world.*

(Steve, twenties, Canadian; 01.09.2011)

Far away from the industrial and commercial centres on China's east coast and long neglected by the central government, the number of expats coming for the sole purpose of *business* in the past years has been relatively small. Alex, an Australian working for a flower company in Kunming, explained:

*I think a lot of foreigners like to live in Kunming and so they come to Kunming and they start a business. I think the difference is, to a lot of other cities people come because of business opportunities, but here, I think, they just find a way to stay here.[...] But if you're a very aggressive business person then Yunnan is not the place for you. You'd be best to go to Shanghai or Beijing or someplace like that.*

(Alex, forties, Australian; 27.08.2011)

In the past few years, the construction of the subway system<sup>19</sup> and the expansion of the tobacco and flower industry, has led to an increase of foreign companies and high-skilled professionals in the city.<sup>20</sup> Francesca has been living in Kunming for more than five years and is running one of most popular bars on the so-called “foreigner street”, giving her the opportunity to observe the developments of the city’s foreign population:

*I’ve got a feeling that the expat community is growing and growing and now we see expat types we had never seen before, like the business man sent by the company overseas. That has been very common in Shanghai for the last twenty years or so, but I’ve never seen something happening like this here before, while in the past two or three years I see more and more.*

(Francesca, thirties, Italian; 25.08.2011)

A significant part of the foreigners living in Kunming is assumed to be missionaries. Alex and his Finish wife Nena, whose kids are attending an international school run by missionaries, told me that most of them are U.S.-citizens and were sent by their, mainly Baptist, churches ten to fifteen years ago. They are spread throughout the city and rarely mix with the other expats. Proselytising is officially illegal in China, but since a lot of the missionaries are engaged in poverty mediation and aid projects, government officials have long turned a blind eye on them (Alex and Nena; 27.08.2011).

The recent developments taking place have not only attracted a different kind of expat to Kunming, but have also led to growing concern of the local government about its foreign population. Alex has noticed that regulations have been getting more restrictive for those who are here for non-business related reasons:

*I think they try to clean up some of those people [missionaries]. And also because Yunnan is one of the cheaper places in China, you have a lot of people that are just living here not really doing anything, drinking and chasing girls. And the government probably wants to clean that kind of people up as well.*

(Alex, forties, Australian; 27.08.2011)

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<sup>19</sup> The first two lines are scheduled to be opened in 2012. <http://www.subways.net/china/kunming.htm> (accessed February 13,2013)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.echinacities.com/kunming/business-guide/economic-overview/foreign-trade-foreign-direct.html> (accessed January 13,2012)

However, not only the local government's attitude towards foreigners has changed, but also that of the local population, as Jeremy, a Scottish in his early thirties, who has been living in Kunming for six years, has noticed:

*I think that the attitude has started to change somewhat, because you've had so many travellers or people coming to China venting their frustrations, trying to find themselves, making mistakes, behaving badly. It's a narrow example, but I think the example of Kundu is really good. When I first came to Kunming you could go out to Kundu [Kunming's night club area], you could go out to the night clubs and you would get free drinks, people would be friendly with you and respect you. If you go there now, there's an underlined feeling of dislike because of the behaviour that there's been.*

(Jeremy, thirties, Scottish; 03.11.2011)

### 2.3. Locating the expats in the city

Although more and more Western foreigners decide to settle in Kunming, this is not equally visible throughout the city. As Eric Cohen has already noted in 1977:

“The dynamics of expatriate residential ecology [...] tends to lead towards the emergence of dispersed clusters of expatriate dwelling in one general sector of the city, [...] away from the single, homogenous and segregated expatriate neighbourhood.” (Cohen 1977, 29)

Expatriates usually settle in the in best, newest neighbourhoods located in the modern parts of the city; they often lie in a convenient location outside the main urban centre (Cohen 1977:30). The expats in Kunming demonstrate Cohen's theory well in the sense that they are largely located in two different areas of the city. The first area has generated around *cuihugongyuan*, Green Lake Park and the campuses of Yunnan University and Yunnan Normal University. It's a fairly quiet and green neighbourhood with few buildings higher than seven floors, a big variety of bars, restaurants, cafés and clothing stores, and only a few bus stops away to the main city centre. As the numbers of expats increases, rents are constantly rising, however most Western expats and students can still afford them. The second area attracting a lot of foreigners is *beichen*, literally “northern star”, a recently built commerce and business centre in the far North of the city. Besides a huge *Metro* supermarket, shopping malls, and dozens of new apartment blocks, there are a handful of foreign-owned, comparatively expanded, restaurants and cafés located on Beichen's

pedestrian street. The foreigners gravitated by this part of the city are primarily businesses and missionaries.

My research was mainly concentrated on the first area around Green Lake Park, which is still the place where most of the expats' social interaction takes place. The street of *Wenlin Jie*<sup>21</sup> and the attached alley of *Wenhua Xiang*<sup>22</sup> are often referred to as "Foreigner Street", by both Chinese locals and expats themselves. It owes its name to the big range of foreign-owned cafés and bars, serving Western-style food and drinks, as well as a book store selling books in foreign languages and a small grocery store that offers a variety of imported food and drinks. A friend of mine told this anecdote that helps illustrating how much this street is linked to the expat community in the mind of the locals: One night he and some other expats hailed a taxi in the city centre to go to *Wenlin Jie*. After five minutes, when they had almost reached their destination, they realized, they hadn't even told the driver where to go; he automatically assumed, since they were all foreigners that this is where they wanted to go. The story also shows that whole areas of the city are not only excluded from the mental maps of expatriates themselves (Cohen 1977, 32), but also in the mind of locals placing them in certain areas not expecting them to go anywhere else. In the case of Kunming, the area expatriates are essentially linked to is that around Green Lake, respectively *Wenlin Jie*<sup>23</sup>. It is not only the place where expats usually go for eating, drinking and social interaction; many of them live directly on or within walking distance to this street. When I asked Gabriel, an English expat in his mid-twenties, where he spent most of his time, he answered:

*I'm never at home. Friend's houses, a lot of the time on this street [Wenlin Jie]. I live near this street, so a lot of the time on this street. If I didn't live here I probably wouldn't spend so much time here. (...) But I'm never at home.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

Most of my participant observation took place in the Western bars on *Wenlin Jie* and their names will be mentioned throughout this paper. The most popular one is likely to be *Salvador's Coffee House*, run by three Americans and one Japanese; it serves Tex-Mex and other American-style food. Most of the products used, including coffee, are under the label of *GreenKunming* and are produced on *Haobao Organic Farm*.

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<sup>21</sup> *Wenlin Jie* literally means "cultural forest street".

<sup>22</sup> *Wenhua Xiang* can be translated as "culture alley" or "education alley".

<sup>23</sup> When I speak of *Wenlin Jie*, this also includes *Wenhua Xiang*.

The outside seating area is usually occupied by Kunming's long-term expats who come there on an almost daily basis. Other popular locations are the Italian-owned *The Box*, offering pizza, Italian wine and other imported Italian groceries; the French-owned *French Café*, selling fresh baguettes and French tarts and *Chapter One*, that holds pub quizzes on a regular basis.

Within walking distance to the *Wenlin Jie* lies *Kundu Night Market*, a military-owned area that mainly consists of big, embracing several night clubs. Young, upper-class Chinese account for the majority of their customers. It is popular among young expats and travellers, because they are given free drinks by Chinese costumers or even bar managers themselves. The diversity in Western-owned restaurants and bars also contributes to the assumption of Kunming being the most agreeable city in China to live in.

## 2.4. Kunming is still a paradise...

As demonstrated above, expats are rarely drawn to Kunming because of its business opportunities. What is it about Kunming that attracts so many foreigners to move here? Although I haven't directly addressed this question during my interviews, most of my informants mentioned at some point what, in their opinion, distinguishes Kunming from so many other places in China. They therefore correspond to Hoey's observations on lifestyle migrants:

"[They] often speak of the great significance of elements perceived as composing unique local character in places to which they relocate and importance of preserving distinctiveness as makeable of unity and difference against the homogenizing process of suburban sprawl." (Hoey 2010, 247)

If you ask any Chinese or foreign resident what they like most about Kunming, you will almost certainly hear "*the weather*." Despite its reputation as "City of Eternal Spring", winters can get quite chilly and most apartments lack a central heating system. Yet, compared to most other Chinese cities the temperature stays fairly mild throughout the year. Describing what they liked most about Kunming, most of my informants did not leave to mention this aspect.

*I think 'cause the weather is nice. That's the major reason. The weather is nice and Kunming is a nice place.*

Alex, forties, Australian; 27.08.2011)

*I know it's a cliché and every Chinese student will say this, but I really like the weather [laughs]. And I think to some extent it sounds like a kind of cop-out, but where I'm from, the weather really, really affects you. It's grey sky and you have SAD, seasonal affective disorder, a lot of people have to kind of wake up in the morning and they stare at a light box for five minutes before they get out of bed. And I find the weather a big factor.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

As pointed out in the comment above, an additional appeal for foreigners to stay in Kunming is the expat community itself. The number of its members is a lot smaller than in cities like Shanghai or Beijing and people come here for many different reasons. Kunming doesn't have any typical "expatriate clubs" with members sharing the same nationality. Although those who speak the same language tend to stick together, the relatively small amount of expats makes it more unlikely for them to encapsulating themselves from others. The expat community therefore appears to be much more diverse than in other cities.

*I mean, that's the thing you love about Kunming, that there is diversity, all the foreigners, all the Chinese people I've met. I don't think that happens everywhere, I've not been to another place in China where that happens like in Kunming.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

Another reason that was mentioned a couple of times was Kunming's convenient location to travel around Yunnan, Tibet and Southeast Asia. Since many expats hold tourist or other kinds of visas that require them to leave the country every once in a while, Kunming's location is regarded to be very convenient for so-called "visa runs" down to Vietnam, Laos or Thailand.

*I travel a bit around Yunnan. That is the main reason for choosing Kunming; it's a good position to go travelling, you can easily travel all over Southeast Asia.*

(Francesca, thirties, Italian; 25.08.2011)

Kunming's population has doubled within the past decade and the city is constantly expanding. The Green Lake area has however stayed more or less untouched by these changes and gives the impression of a rather small city. Many expats had lived in other cities in China before they moved here, either in metropolises such as Shanghai and Beijing, or in small towns somewhere in the countryside with an almost non-existent expat population. Kunming is regarded to be something in between – big enough to enjoy all the advantages of a city (e.g. a decent night life, imported food), but still small enough to be able to move around the city without any problems and to have a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere.

*Kunming's a special place. It's not just a city, right? It's got everything set up for a city, and yet, all the big city life just doesn't exist. It's not a stress.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

*I've been to other place, you know Chongqing, I've been there, and Chengdu, they're too big, right? That's too big. I think Kunming has only 6 million people, right? It's not far; you can be downtown in 10 minutes on the taxi. If you take Chongjin, or Beijing, or Shanghai, it takes forever. Kunming is probably pretty small compared to that and I like that, because you can meet here at 9 o'clock in the middle of town. You know, in Beijing you can't do that, it's too big. You gotta try and get a taxi in Beijing or Shanghai. I don't wanna live there, you know. It's too many people there. Kunming's not too bad; I think it's the best city in China to live in - yeah, definitely.*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

Kunming being the best city in China to live in, had not only been mentioned in most of my interviews, but seems to be the general consent among most members of the expat community, of whom many have lived in other parts of China. Nevertheless, as the following chapters will demonstrate, it is not necessarily the best city to live in *forever*. The lack of opportunities to find a good job or make business is drawing many expats, young people in particular, away to the country's business centres or abroad. The feelings towards Kunming and Yunnan in general, stay nevertheless positive; they are often based on the "laid-back" attitude of its population as well as its government. When Alex came to talk about the particularities of the Kunming locals, he exemplified his impression with a story about the huge marijuana trees growing in the yard of his building complex. They belong to an elderly woman, who grows them for seeds:

*So I'm always joking with that old grandma and say 'One day the police will come and take you away', she goes 'No, it's perfectly okay, I'm only growing them for the seeds'. And then I said 'Why do you grow them for the seeds? Why don't you just buy them?' and she goes 'Oh, it's too expensive'- 18 RMB for a kilo. I mean, nowhere else in China is like that, but yeah, that's Yunnan.*

(Alex, forties, Australian; 27.08.2011)



### 3. Migration

In the previous chapter I have given a general introduction to Yunnan's history, Kunming's history and why it is considered to be an agreeable place to live. According to Theroux (1986:133) many people travel to feel at home somewhere else that is somehow an idealized version of home, e.g. Spain is "home-plus-sunshine", and India is "home-plus-servants". While Kunming is often described as "home plus", the following chapter will show that these pluses are not the main motivation for the expatriates to move there. The analysis of the gathered data also shows that the reasons for migrating to Kunming or China in general, cannot simply be broken down to the concept of pull-/ push-factors. There is no doubt that China's economic uprising has been drawing more and more foreigners to work and live here. As highlighted in the previous chapter though, in the case of Kunming the members of its expat community in a large part cannot be considered typical "business expats". Even if the final decision to move was based on a job offer, they have usually considered leaving home for a long time and the underlying motivations were often more of personal, than of economic nature. When looking at the different reasons these expats give for their migration, it has to be kept in mind "that these are often simply no more than post-hoc justifications, constructed from the perspective of the new context within which they have found themselves (see R. Cohen 1996)." (O'Reilly 2000:28)

Another peculiarity of Kunming's expat population is that many have not planned to actually settle or have decided on the length of their stay in advance. The second part of this chapter will therefore deal with the various reasons for which they decided to stay or "get stuck". I will show that the contentment with this decision strongly depends on age and familial status. Additionally, since not all members of the expat community have moved to Kunming permanently, I will look into the concept of "return visits". The final part of this chapter concentrates on the expats' (lack of) future plans and the explanations they give for staying in Kunming, returning home or moving somewhere completely different. Before doing so, I briefly want to discuss the notion of 'home' and the implications movement has on it.

### 3.1. Home and Movement

Robin Cohen (1997:127f) states “that unidirectional [...] forms of movement are being replaced by asynchronous, transversal flows that involve visiting, studying, seasonal work, tourism and sojourning, rather than whole-family migration, permanent settlement and the adoption of exclusive citizenship.” He further reasons that these patterns will have “important sociological consequences”. As result of these changes the notion and our understanding of ‘home’ has to be put into question. Traditionally, the concept of home is usually linked to or has been synonymous for ‘house’, “within which space and time were structured functionally, economically, aesthetically and morally” (Rapport and Dawson 2008:6). Recently, though, movement rates are increasing and with it the “awareness of the *possibility* of movement”. These tendencies not only lead to a changing “image of individuals as members of fixed and separate societies, cultures, social classes [or] ethnic groups”, but also to re-thinking the concept of ‘home’ (Wallman 1998:195). At least in the Euro-American discourse, identity has become something that has to be achieved, determined by activities and places individuals can choose for themselves; new conceptions of ‘home’ are thus accompanied with “identity issues” and “the search for roots” (Ibid.:197).

Rapport and Dawson (2008:27) propose that the relationship between movement and home has changed and an increasing number of people are considered to be “moving between homes” (between two socio-cultural environments); or to be “at home in continuous movement” (within creolized forms of culture); thus one’s home is the movement itself. Movement as home has become a strategy used by transmigrants to improve their life situation or to simply survive (Faist 2000:197). The personal assessment of the movement’s success depends partly on the actor’s “availability and recognition of alternatives to going/being there” and partly on the actual ramifications of it. In the ideal case, it leads to the betterment in material respect as well as in terms of autonomy and self-determination (Wallman 1998:199). The notion of movement and travelling as a way to gain experience and a possibility for self-realization is not a recently emerged phenomenon, but has existed at least since the Renaissance and Middle Age, when the life of travelling scholars, artists and vagabonds was considered “as a spiritual/creative journey” and “heroic quest”.

Furthermore, “[t]ravel has often been regarded as aiding the decentring of habitual categories [and] a form of playing with cultural disorder” (Featherstone 1995: 127f).

As a new definition, Rapport and Dawson (2008:9) therefore suggest, that home “‘is where one best knows oneself’ – where ‘best’ means ‘most’, even if not always ‘happiest’”. The notion inherits a double meaning “as both a concrete physical place and a personal place for identification” (Olwig 1998:225). This concept differs from the prevalent idea of ‘home’ as a harmonious, homogenous place providing a shelter from outside conflicts, but suggests that ‘home’ is rather “an arena where differing interest struggle to define their own spaces within which to localize and cultivate their identity”, and can span a range of different home sites (Olwig 1998:226). ‘Home’ also is also extensively dependant on social relations, which nowadays are no longer intimately tied to a certain location and can thus be easily maintained. It has to be pointed out though, that these new ideas of ‘home’, arising from a variety of options and the possibility to move to places where one can best get to know oneself, first and foremost reflect the situation of members of the Western middle class (Ibid.:236), who owing their relative economic privilege have the means to do so.

## **3.2. Reasons for coming to China**

### ***3.2.1. Migration from West to East***

Although throughout modern history most migrants have moved from developed to less developed countries, it is nowadays usually the other way around. Yet, the phenomenon of western high skilled workers and lifestyle migrants moving away from their developed home countries to less developed one is still overlooked (Korpela 2009:17; Lan 2011:1671). Before I move on to analysing the motivations of the migrants themselves, I shortly want to introduce this migration phenomenon and give an overview of the recent history of China’s policy towards foreign visitors and what opportunities and restrictions they hold.

In terms of high skilled workers, Findlay (1990:368) identifies two main motors responsible for this sort of movement. As the first he mentions the “globalisation of

production”; this entails an increase of multinational companies setting up branches in developed as well as developing parts of the world. The second motor he makes out is the economic growth in several less developed countries leading to growing labour demands that can in the short term only be met by skilled immigration. “Most nations, however, do not favour large scale settler migration and instead seek to meet specific skilled shortages by permitting (if not promoting) transient skill movements.” (Findley 1990:366) This development can also be observed in the People’s Republic of China.

In “Making the foreign serve China: managing foreigners in the People’s Republic” (2003), Anne-Marie Brady gives an overview of the developments in China’s policies towards foreigners since the early 1990’s when the Foreign Experts’ Bureau started to invite more and more foreigners into the country. The quota on international students was loosened, leading to triplication of the number of students between 1991 and 1996. Since teaching foreigners Chinese was seen as an important tactic to improve the economic and cultural relations between China and the West, by 1998 the universities had been given the right to enrol foreign students without the exigency of individual approval of the State Education Commission. Students and high-skilled professionals were not the only ones that could easily obtain a residence permit. In need of “foreign talent” the Chinese government invited foreign non-profit organizations, even turning a blind eye on their engagement in missionary activities. Retired professionals were also welcomed; firstly because of their skills and experience, secondly because they were less likely to stay for a very long time and generally had retirement income to supplement to the relatively low salary they received in China (Brady 2003: 229).

This change in policies also led to an increase of foreign tourists visiting the country and areas they were allowed to enter in the 1990’s. Further alterations, like the abolition of the dual currency in 1994 and the more ready availability of foreign exchange made it more convenient for foreigners to visit China. Over the years, the distinction between hotels for foreigners- and Chinese-only became blurred and after 1996 foreign sojourners officially no longer had to pay higher charges for long-distance travel and other items, such as museum entrances (Ibid.: 230). The loosening of regulations concerning foreigners’ entering and staying in China, as well

as the country's economic boom have made China not only relatively easy to access, but also a very auspicious destination.

### *3.2.2. Opportunities in China vs. personal motivations for leaving home*

"The Wild West has become the Wild East!" – This is how an Italian expat described China's current situation for foreigners. The decision to move to China was not seldom supported by the country's economic upswing, leading to the assumption that the movement offered them new perspectives and opportunities, which they would not have back home. This was stressed by several informants: Joost mentioned that in terms of opening a bar or setting up a business things work out much quicker than they would in Europe, noting that China is a bubble at the moment and that it might change soon (Joost, 26.10.2011). Anna, a German architect in her mid-thirties, also told me that she was currently on a project for a 350m high sky scraper and more or less responsible for it, because she was the only one in her company who had worked on a similar project before. Opportunities that she would not have in Germany do not only emerge in the professional, but also in the private area. Anna spends most of a free time painting and had been given the chance to have her own exhibition at TCG Nordica<sup>24</sup>. The opportunity of realizing creative ideas was also mentioned by Gabriel. After his initial plan to set up a record label and to organize parties failed, he published a magazine called "No Culture" together with a group of young, local expats and Chinese. According to him it would be impossible in England to have a full-time job and dedicate half of your time into something that you want to do; also you would not be able to make a magazine with just your own money (Gabriel, 22.08.2011).

Steve was in his mid-20s when he decided to leave Canada and start looking for jobs in China. Although born in Kunming, news reports on China's economic boom played the most decisive role in awaking his interest and led him into feeling "maybe there's something here in China for me." Before he came to China, he had studied

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<sup>24</sup> TCG Nordica is a Scandinavian art gallery and culture center, that provides artists living in Kunming with the opportunity to exhibit their work and regularly hosts concerts and performances.

Communication in Vancouver and was planning on becoming a government spokesman in Canada, but couldn't, since his French was not good enough. After his graduation, he had been working for corporations in Canada for two years but then got bored with "the kind of typical 8 to 5, Monday to Friday job", as he describes it. He started looking for a new job and lived on welfare for a while; the idea to move to China essentially arose when a friend in Shanghai told him about a management job at Disney Company. Even though the position was already taken by the time he applied, he yet decided to pursue a career in China. After his arrival, he chose to live with his parents in Kunming, who are running a business there and to work as an English teacher (Steve, 01.09.2011). He explained his motivation to move as follows:

*Back home everything was developed and we couldn't expect something surprising to our life, so we're sort of just sticking to the normal regular schedule and no one would worry about medical care and any sort of living necessity because everything's supported by the government and people are kind of living a very laid-back, relaxed and enjoyable life. I would say it was kind of like paradise, but I don't think it was the reality. So I decided to leave. I think back home you couldn't be too rich, you couldn't be too poor, you're just staying average for the rest of your life and there's not much of a challenge; you just need to get a good job and stay there forever - until you retire, and then you get the whole big pensions plans from the government. I would say with China, there is a way sort of to upgrade yourself, there's a lot of opportunities here and a lot of other things that you can do if you're here more than back home.*

(Steve, 01.09.2011)

Steve's comment shows that moving to China not only offers new opportunities, but is also a getaway from a life that is somehow considered to be meaningless and boring. While a job offer was often the decisive reason to move to China, it was rarely the main motivation for it.

This can also be seen in the case of Jeremy, a British national in his early thirties, who came to China eight years ago. When I addressed the general question of how he came here, he answered:

*Basically I didn't like my hometown and never really felt at home there. My parents had moved from England to Scotland; that was a total shift in culture and I never really felt comfortable with it. I was kind of stuck in a job that wasn't great and I've made some bad decisions, so I restarted to be an English teacher.*

(Jeremy, 03.11.2011)

Jeremy had spent the first two years in the North of China teaching English and then moved to Kunming with his soon-to-be wife, where he is now working as an IELTS-examiner. Several aspects he mentioned that had influenced his decision to leave Britain and make a new start were highlighted again in the course of the interview. He later described his youth as misspent, not going further into detail what kind of bad decisions he had made and described the relationship with his family as debatable (Jeremy, 03.11.2011). I have observed the latter also amongst many other expats. This was confirmed during the conversation with Jeremy right before the interview in which he asked me about my motivations to keep coming back to Kunming. He assumed that the relationship with my parents was a difficult one, which in his impression is the case for most expats, and thus seemed a little surprised when I told him it was not. Another common explanation given for leaving one's country is the dislike of and the dissatisfaction with society and culture. This was also brought up by Jeremy:

*I didn't like my society, I didn't like my culture. I never really felt I get along with people, which is just as much a reflection of me as it is of them.*

(Jeremy, 03.11.2011)

According to Ethan, an English writer who has been living in Asia since the early nineties, in order to understand the expats in Kunming, I need to understand that the move away from the West roots in their disgust of the so-called "democracy" there and that they have no intention of going back. While true for some of them, my interviews and observations have shown that this assumption does not apply to all members of Kunming's expat community. More common seems the lack of nationalistic feelings for the home country – like Joost who told me he had no patriotic sentiments for Holland, or Yael, a young Israeli, who said she had to leave Israel to love it (Joost, 26.10.2011).

As the examples of Steve and Jeremy have shown, being stuck in a dead-end job and the desire to make new experiences is also a quite common reason for the actor's decision to migrate. Although Joost, a Dutch in his early 40s had initially moved to Kunming one and a half years ago to be with his Chinese wife, who had met in Holland and his now running a bar with. When talking about of the act of migration though, he places great value on a different aspect of it, reasoning that he

did not want to retire when he is 60 years old, knowing that he is done the same thing his whole life; what he is doing in Kunming does not make him rich moneywise, but he has the feeling that it makes his life a lot richer (Joost, 26.10.2011).

It is not surprising that not only an unsatisfactory working position, but also unemployment induces people to migrate. Dave, an English in his late fifties, was unemployed and living on welfare before he first came to China twenty years ago.

*I thought 'I've gotta get a job somewhere', but I didn't really want to stay in England. I saw an advert for teaching English as a foreign language at Liverpool University, so I took the course and then obviously started applying for jobs and the first job offer I got was here in China at an NGO. That was the first one I got offered, so I thought 'To hell with it, you're doing nothing here!', so I was like 'Get away!' But it was a big jump back then, I've never been outside Europe really, but I thought 'Why not? Go to China and see what happens', I had nothing to do really, I was unemployed there.*

(Dave, 22.10.2011)

Like Dave, some expats have not deliberately chosen China as migration destination. China's relatively relaxed visa policy and countless job offers for English native speakers to teach have also made it a popular getaway. I remember a young American once told me that he came to China in the first place, because it was an easy way to leave the U.S.: *I wanted to get out of the U.S. and I made it, baby!* After first living in different parts of China, he eventually moved to Kunming for the means of blue sky and being able to play football any time of the year.

So far I have demonstrated the variety of private and economic reasons that have led the expats to their decision to move to China. However, the explicit wish of many expats to live in China or Kunming should not remain unmentioned. As I have already noted in the description of the expat community in the previous chapter, many of its members have formally been or still are Chinese language students. Francesca, who is now running a bar on *Wenlin Jie*, first came to Kunming in 2004 on recommendation of her professor to study at Yunnan University for one semester. After nine months back in Italy, she started to look for jobs in China and found one in Shanghai in 2006, where she stayed for a year, before finally returning to Kunming (Francesca, 25.08.2011). A similar story is that of Alex, who had already been studying Chinese in High School and university and first came to Kunming as an exchange student (Alex and Nena, 27.08.2011). While being in Kunming as a student gives the impression that one can lead quite a relaxing and care-free life there, many

things turn out to be much more difficult after one has decided to actually live and work there (Francesca 25.08.2011)

The exposition of the various reasons and motivations given by expats shows that the act of migration can somewhat be understood as an escape, “an escape *from* somewhere and something, while simultaneously an escape *to* self-fulfillment and a new life” (O’Reilly and Benson 2009:3). Although the act of migrating to China was ultimately triggered by a job offer or the prospect to be with one’s partner, it was usually preceded by an explicit wish or urge to leave the home country for a certain period of time. The justifications and rationalizations given by the actors are diverse, but are all somehow characterized by an underlying implication of an enabled self-realization.

By taking a close look at the different migration stories, one can identify a sense of continuity that eventually led them to settle in Kunming. Alex and Francesca had previously been there as students; Joost had been visiting his wife many times before he decided to settle; Steve was born there and his decision was preceded by his parents’ return; Katja, a Russian in her late twenties, has been studying Chinese in Kunming for four years and is currently pursuing a Bachelor degree in Chinese language and culture, moved to there on her sister’s advice. Her sister had been studying in Kunming before and got married to a local Chinese, with whom she is now living in Russia, but owns an apartment in Kunming, in which Katja is now staying (Katja, 19.08.2011). Most of my other informants had at least visited the city before they decided to settle. It is thus rarely a matter of coincidence that the actors choose Kunming as their destination. These former stays and the popular perceptions of Kunming, which I have outlined in the previous chapter, show that “associations between places and the images of life available there are not just drawn out of air, they rely on long histories of prior engagements and reflect wider cultural imaginings about places” (O’Reilly and Benson 2009:6).



### 3.3. Reasons for staying

I have mentioned before, the expat community in Kunming is often described as “backpackers-turned-long-timers” community. Many of its members had no explicit plans to temporarily or permanently settle there and even after having done so, are still unsure when or if they will return or move to a different place.

Recent economic and social developments are commonly used by expatriates to justify the unforeseeable length of their stay and the short-sighted view of their own future. During my stay, Greece’s recession and its implications for the rest of the European Union were a hotly debated topic amongst Kunming’s expat population, especially amongst long-termers who had no intention of returning anytime soon. My impression was confirmed by Gabriel, who had asked his friends why they thought they were here, before the interview appointment; based on the answers he received, he concluded that people don’t really know why they are here, but don’t really have any other place to go. He sees no point in going back to England these days and has the impression that Europe is expecting major trouble in the next couple of years. According to him, the other expats share this view and after debating this topic concluded that it is nice to be in Kunming and not have to worry about it (Gabriel, 22.08.2011). Concerns for the uncertainty of Europe’s future was also brought up by Joost. He mentioned sometimes having the feeling that he should be worrying about his pension, but doesn’t really like to think so far ahead in the future. “*Besides*”, he reasoned, “*in Europe it’s also not much better nowadays*” (Joost, 26.10.2011).

#### 3.3.1. Staying vs. Getting stuck

Not knowing where else to go and not having any prospects at home, is a common reason why expats have decided to stay in Kunming. In her study on lifestyle migrants in Varansi (India), Mari Korpela (2009:26) argued that it is particularly difficult for young lifestyle migrants that have neglected their careers or education for several years and have gotten used to a relatively carefree life abroad, to return to the West. In several conversations with young expats about how they came to stay in Kunming, the story was finished by them with the phrase “*...and then I got stuck*”

*here*". This comment gives rise to the assumption that the decision to stay was not an entirely optional one and that they are not necessarily happy about it. Rob, an Irish expat in his late twenties, first came to Kunming in autumn 2009 to study Chinese for one year and then find a job in one of China's major cities. After several months he had decided to apply for the Chinese government's scholarship program for foreigners studying in China, got accepted and thus stayed for another year. In the meanwhile he had worked out a plan with another young expat to set up a business in Beijing. He was still in Kunming, when I came back to do my research; although he had made some progress in realizing his plans, he was still not certain for how much longer his stay will endure. Several times when talking to foreign students who had just arrived in Kunming, I heard him say "*make sure you don't get stuck here*". In the night before my departure, after I told him that I wish I could stay a little longer, he (half-) jokingly said "*You made it! You escaped! Tell me how you did it*".

The ambivalent feeling, shared by many young expats, of enjoying life in Kunming on one hand, and not making any progress on the other, was expressed by Rob with the saying "*I love this city, but I hate myself*". While it is easy to find a teaching job with a salary that covers all the costs and often allows them a more pleasant and carefree lifestyle than they would have back home, it is not something that they want to be doing for the rest of their lives. Since most young expats are holding university degrees, they often feel an urge to have a career that corresponds with their competences. A good example for this is Gabriel, who had obtained a bachelor degree in music at an English university and has been working as an English teacher in China for over three years. After working in Nanjing for a year, he realized that his Chinese language skills were still very basic and thus decided to stay to improve them. He applied for several teaching jobs, and eventually got an offer in Kunming. In the beginning of his stay he had several business ideas and the desire to make a change, but things did not work out quite like he expected (Gabriel, 22.08.2011). During the interview Gabriel mentioned over and over again how much he likes the city itself, but also remarks:

*Kunming, it's this escape or this dream, nothing ever changes.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

He also said that he did not enjoy the first job he had in Kunming as he was not given enough freedom. As a consequence he quit in November 2010 before going back to

England for Christmas and was planning on not teaching English again after his return. He stuck to his plan for a couple of months, but by August gave in and resumed work as teacher, because he “*just didn’t not want to be do nothing anymore*”. In his new job, where he was still working at the time of the interview, he had the feeling he was given more respect and thereby enjoyed the teaching a lot more. At the same time, he made clear that it was only a temporary solution and still feels the urge to get a “real” job and move on to a different place like Hong Kong in order to do so. He also noted that staying in Kunming has made him somehow cynical and the reflection of his decision is not utterly positive (Gabriel, 22.08.2011).

*I came here for a reason, to go home as a different person. I don’t know what different, better, I guess. I don’t know what happened, becoming a better or worse person. Or whether I’m happier or less happy about what I’m doing with myself. But since I’m here I feel pressure to do something with myself.*

(Gabriel, 22.08.2011)

Reasoning about why people decide to stay or get stuck in Kunming and why he finds it so hard to just leave to “do something with himself”, Gabriel explained:

*You’ve got everything you need, you’ve got enough money...it’s kind of the ultimate escape. You’re alive, the world doesn’t touch you, you don’t touch the world. Some people love that. That’s why a lot of older guys stay here. I know that’s not all about getting married and having a girlfriend, it’s about not being in the real world. A year ago, I would have thought that was bullshit, but now it doesn’t seem so nice to go back to the real world.*

(Gabriel, 22.08.2011)

Gabriel’s comment also addresses the correspondence of the expatriates’ age and relationship status with the contentment of their current life situation, something regularly noticed in the course of my participant observation. Elder expatriates, who are close to or past the retirement age in their country, generally show little will to leave Kunming again. This can be highlighted by a comment of Dave, who – in his late 50s - can be considered as one of the “older guys” Gabriel mentioned, and clearly has a completely different attitude towards the prolonging of his stay:

*I think I’ll live here for a long time, you know. I don’t have a reason to leave. And there’s no point leaving somewhere if you’re happy there. You know what I mean? That’s what I’m saying; I think that in five years I’ll probably still be here.*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

The contentment with the decision to stay does not only depend on age, but also on the familial and relationship status. Being in a relationship with a local makes it more

likely for expatriates to make Kunming their home base. Jeremy, for example, who had moved to Kunming to be with his girlfriend, a local Chinese, said they were planning to open a coffee shop in the northern area of *Beichen*, partly because of the money, but partly to have something that is your own to which he can always return to. Even though is not sure yet whether he will stay here or not, due to the positive experiences he has made here and the effort he has put into getting a job he likes, he considers Kunming to be his home and not the UK, where he had grown up.

*I've been here six years and I've been working and my position in the UK wasn't great. As I said, I made some bad decisions, it was a misspent youth and I came here and I've worked. I've put six years to build a life here, so for me here is home, but the UK is not my home.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

### **3.3.2. Return visits – the Kunming rubber band**

As mentioned before, not all members of the expat community have decided to temporarily or permanently settle in Kunming. While the last part of this chapter will show that many are very certain they will eventually leave, others have never really settled in the first placed but have somehow made Kunming their “second home”. Unlike most expats, they have planned the length of their stay in advance, but keep visiting on a regular basis. These return visits were usually preceded by a longer stay in Kunming, during which the actor had been studying or working. They maintain close social ties to permanent members of the expat community, and thus hold potential for migrating there in the future. Duval explored the concept of return visits in the context of diasporic communities and identified three key characteristics of returning visitors. As the first, he mentioned their prior non-touristic experience at the destination and pronounced social and cultural knowledge of it. The second characteristics of returning visitors are their extensive social and familial ties, which are renewed and intensified by their visits (Duval 2004:51); thirdly he determines them to be “part of a larger and self-ascribed social unit that is [...] formed as a result of past voluntary migratory episodes.” (Ibid.:51)

An example for a return visitor is Steve, an Australian in his mid-twenties, who first came to Kunming to study in 2008 and has since regularly been coming back for

varying periods of time. The lengths of his stays are dependent on their purpose and the time he can take off from studying or working. When I first met him in August 2011, he had just returned for three months from a trip to Europe, which was preceded by a shorter stay to Kunming to attend a friend's wedding. A couple of weeks later, an English guy who had also been living in Kunming before visited and the two of them were joking about they will always keep returning. They called this phenomenon "the Kunming rubber band" – even though after staying here for a while, you reach the point where you want to leave, there is something about this place that keeps pulling you back.

Although many expatriates wish to eventually settle somewhere else, it does not necessarily mean they will not periodically return to Kunming. When asked about her plans for the future, Francesca answered that she was planning on moving back to Italy in a couple of years, but would also like to have a base in Kunming and return 2-3 times a year, the other way round as she does it now. I therefore propose that in the long run especially young expats will maintain intimate social ties to Kunming and thus continue to be part of the expat community.

### 3.4. Reasons for leaving

The contentment with their current life in Kunming, their relationship status and their professional prospects all have a considerable impact on the expatriates' plans for the future and the desired continuation of their stay. Apart from Dave, who is already in his late fifties, Steve, whose parents also live in Kunming and Jeremy, who had moved there to be with his fiancée, all of my informants expressed the wish to live somewhere else in the long-run. I therefore conclude that the readiness to move on is also depending on age and familial status, as well as the expatriate's occupational establishment in the city. Francesca, who is currently running a bar on *Wenlin Jie*, explained that she feels more and more that her roots are somewhere else, but will not move back to Europe until her food import business is established enough to be operated from outside of China (Francesca, 25.08.2011). Joost and his wife, who are also running a bar in Kunming, have talked about moving to Holland once they have

children, but have not yet made a concrete decision on whether they would actually do so. He simply noted that he does not want to be buried in Kunming (Joost, 26.10.2011). The preparedness to leave was, however, more pronounced by younger expatriates, who usually lack such intimate social and economic ties to the city. Gabriel was anticipating a job offer in Hong Kong at the time of the interview he quit his job as an English teacher to temporarily move there two months later. Peter, a Dutch who is about the same age as Gabriel, first came to Kunming in September 2010 to work at a Dutch flower export company. He quit eight months later, but decided to stay and study Chinese. He said he would like to stay here longer if he finds a new job, but if it does not work out, he is also happy to move back to Holland (Peter, 03.11.2011).

Of all my informants, Alex and Nena were the only ones who had a very precise idea of how much longer they will stay in Kunming. They have been living in China for more than twelve years already, but decided to move to Finland (where Nena comes from) in three years after Alex' work contract expires and their eldest son is about to attend high school. As another reason influencing their decision they mention that China is not a nice place for old people and that it is hard for them to move around due to its lack of infrastructure. Although not applying on them, Alex and Nena also explained that one of the biggest reasons why more and more expat families are leaving is because companies do not bear the costs for their children's tuition fee and they have become too expensive for an individual to pay (Alex and Nena, 27.08.2011). A French expatriate I talked with, gave me further explanations of why in his impression more and more expatriates are leaving Kunming: the first was that many foreigners had been married to their Chinese partner for 10-15 years, recently got divorced and now have no reason to stay any longer; the second was that there has been a lot of change in Kunming going on during the last decade and it has become a lot more expensive.

As for Gabriel and Alex, moving away does not necessarily mean moving back to one's country of origin. Besides, Kunming has in most cases not been the first destination after migrating. "[M]igration is not a one-off move to a permanent destination, nor is it the final part of a journey. The search for the good 'life' remains an impulse in their daily lives." (O'Reilly and Benson 2009:10) The migrant's decision for a certain destination is made in regard to what kind of life they desire (Ibid.:9). As

the following chapters will show, living in Kunming is not as relaxed and easy as often assumed. The problems and restrictions expats have to face, especially in terms of occupation, can thus lead to disappointment and the insight that living there is not as self-fulfilling as expected. This not only provokes the feeling of “being stuck”, but also the wish to move on to a new place or even to return to the initial home.



## 4. Living in Kunming

### *The organization of everyday life and its challenges*

*Sometimes difficult things seem to be very easy, and then the simplest thing turns out to be a very difficult matter.*

(Francesca, 25.08.2011)

I have already given an illustration of the main motivations that influence expatriates' decision to leave their country of origin and to move to Kunming. Further, I looked at the reasons why they decide to stay, respectively "get stuck", in Kunming, as well as why they may want to move away from it. The aim of the following chapter is to give a more detailed description of expatriates' everyday lives in Kunming - what challenges they have to face and how their lives there differentiate from their lives back home. The main issues that expatriates in Kunming are concerned with are connected to social relations, free time activities, freedom and insecurity (especially in regard to bureaucracy). In the last part of this chapter I will explain the notion of "Bad China Days", commonly used by expatriates throughout the country.

#### 4.1. Friendship, Emotional Stability and Being Alone

To answer the question what the main difference was between his life in Holland and his life in Kunming, Peter took out a pen and a piece of paper and drew a graph with a line in the middle and two additional lines - one representing his emotional state when in Holland and the other when in Kunming. While drawing the first line, he explained that in Holland it generally stays close to the middle line and from time to time slightly going above (which he called "tops") or below ("lows") it. He then drew the line representing his emotional state when living in Kunming; the line diverged much stronger from the middle line and the tops and lows alternated much more frequently than those of the other line. He explained that these "lows" are mainly a result of the "tops" you have here, meaning that because there are times with a lot of

entertainments, the “lows” instantly feel much worse than they would in Holland. This is particularly true in regard of social relationships:

*In Holland I know some of my friends since I was born. Those are different friends than someone that arrived here a month ago. And also there are these tops; for example, I met a girl like two months ago, then for a few weeks we met every day, just a couple of hours. We were not really interested in a relationship, but we had a good time. But now, after a couple of weeks she's busy; then you feel like 'Grrmh'. While in Holland, you don't have this. It's like you meet someone on a regular basis, of course it can be less frequent, instead of twice a month you go back to once a month, or twice a month to three times a month. See, you don't have to meet that someone like every day. Life in Holland with the people I know in my area is not at all like this.*

(Peter, twenties, Dutch; 03.11.2011)

Social relationships in Kunming are not only a lot more (time-) intensive than they usually are at home, but also much more transient. Alex and Nena have seen many friends coming and going during the past twelve years and admitted that it gets a bit tiring in the long run (Alex and Nena, 27.08.2011). Steve mentioned that he did not have really tight buddies in Kunming like he had back in Canada, whom he had known for most of his life. When there is something he wants to talk about, he thus has to rely on Skype or Facebook (Steve, 01.09.2011). The issue of transiency and the lacking stability of relationships was also addressed by Francesca; when I asked her what she was missing the most in Kunming, she answered:

*Affection, or let's say stable relationships, especially because, as I said, in Kunming most people come and go. I mean, now I've got many, many friends from all over the world, on the other [hand] it takes a while to be in a stable relationship.*

(Francesca, thirties, Italian; 25.08.2011)

Thanks to her work behind the bar, she had got to know a lot of people – with some of them she has made friends, with some really close friends, and to some she only makes small talk, not really knowing who they are. Francesca concluded that she was probably luckier than other people, because she found herself in a social situation where she had to meet a lot of people and was therefore able to choose who she wanted to get to know better and spend more time with (Francesca, 25.08.2011). The relatively limited choice in terms of social relationships was also mentioned by Gabriel:

*When you live in a place like China, or anyway if you are a foreigner - it's not just China – you are not able to choose your friends and your peers as easily as when you're at home.*

*So that makes you more open-minded. But I'm 24 and the majority of my friends I hang out with are 35, and I think I'm missing out on about 11 years of my life, you know.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

Dave spends most of his free time on *Wenlin Jie* and said, like Francesca, while he knew a lot of people in Kunming, apart from three or four, he would not consider them as close friends; *the others* are people that he meets every now and then and to which he has a friendly relationship, but would not tell any secrets and if he did not see them, he would not miss their company; *the rest*, he said, are just people that he knows. Dave also pointed out that in Kunming it is much more likely that you have conversations with people that you do not find interesting and would not bother talking to back home (Dave, 22.10.2011). Instead of complaining about the limited choice of people one actually would want to be friends with, most expats tend to describe it as a way to become more open-minded. The superficiality of relationships within the expat community was also described by Joost, who explained that everyone here is a traveler and on his own, therefore everyone he meets is a friend for that particular moment. Naturally they are not like friends from High School who he has known all his life, but for the moment he hangs out with them they are his friends (Joost, 26.10.2011). Francesca also alluded to this fact, that most expats are more or less here on their own. Since she was here without any family, Francesca simultaneously emphasized how important it was to have friends here that she could rely on and who would take care of things should anything happen to her (Francesca, 25.08.2011). Katja, on the other hand, pictures this fact as an initiator for personal development:

*I think I grew up here so quickly because I'm here alone, I take care of myself without anybody here and I think that makes a difference.*

(Katja, twenties, Russian; 19.08.2011)

Being alone in Kunming, naturally, also leads to loneliness. The reason for this is largely the superficiality of the majority of relationships, which is often even more pronounced in those with the local Chinese, than it is with other expatriates. Joost admitted that he gets very lonely in Kunming, since he does not even know the people next door, while in Holland he knew the whole village. He misses the ease of being able to go over to someone else's place, sit down, drink beer and watch television. This is something that no one does here in China (Joost, 26.10.2011).

Based on my observations, I argue that the likeliness to feel lonely, as well as quantity of social relationships considerably depend on the duration of the expatriates' stay, however not the quality. Expatriate who have been in Kunming for an extensive period of time eventually seek contact with other long-termers, mainly because the constant coming and going of friends can get tiring. These relationships might be more stable, yet not necessarily 'better' than transient ones.

## 4.2. Free Time

In the last chapter I have already mentioned that many expats feel they have "too much" free time or are not really doing anything. They however do not necessarily declare it as boredom. This differentiation is best shown by Gabriel's comment on how he usually spends his free time:

*I watched more movies here. I think if I had to leave China tomorrow, I wouldn't watch as many movies in the rest of my life as I watched in the three years in China. And that's not from being bored necessarily but from not having anything else to do.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

When Joost answered the same question, he accentuated that he had too much free time and had become very lazy in Kunming. He said he didn't do much apart from playing the guitar (which he had stopped playing in Holland, but picked up when he came here). He was also happy to do so-called monkey shows, because at least they give him a reason to get up early in the morning every now and then. Joost also mentioned that his wife always complained that the bar was so much work, but they only work there six hours a day, which he stated would be nothing in Europe. He then turned to Yael, a young Israeli, who sat opposite and asked her if could confirm his assumption that living in Kunming makes people very lazy. She agreed, saying that, apart from working as a tour guide showing Israeli visitors around Yunnan every once in a while, she basically does nothing all day long apart from lying on her sofa watching DVDs and hanging around in bars (Joost, 26.10.2011).

Although a lot of expats do not openly admit it when directly asked "what they do all day?" drinking in bars on *Wenlin Jie* is quite a common way of spending one's free

time. Since most of my participant observation took place at the bars on *Wenlin Jie*, I knew quite well who went where and how frequently. One of them was Dave; when I asked him in the course of the interview how he usually spent his time, he started by saying that he normally watches DVDs or goes online to email and talk to friends; otherwise he goes to Salvador's, Mask or Camel. Interestingly though, he mentions later on in the interview, that he spent all of his time there (Dave, 22.10.2011). Gabriel, on the other hand, immediately admitted that he was never at home but instead spent most of his time on *Wenlin Jie*, reasoning he would not do so, if he did not live on it. A couple of weeks later, he moved into a new apartment, which was a twenty-minute bus ride away from *Wenlin Jie* (by Kunming standards this is considered to be quite far). Yet, he still went there almost as often as before; at least until he knew he was going to Hong Kong and had to save up money.

Drinking is not only perceived as way to enjoy oneself, but also as a means of killing time. Everyday afternoon at 4 p.m. *Salvador's* starts its "Happy Hour" and lasts for four hours. When sitting in front of the bar during this time, I frequently heard young expats mentioning that they do not really feel like drinking, but there was not anything else to do. Steve had a similar experience after his arrival to Kunming, but changed his lifestyle after he had found a job.

*It was very interesting in the beginning, when I didn't have a job. I went to Kundu and hung out with some friends there. So it was pretty crazy, laid-back; I didn't know what to do in Kunming until I found a job and things started to get normal. I was a full-time teacher, I had to be respondent to my students, so I needed to get enough rest. I would say, my life was a lot more regulated than before. And I was working from Monday to Friday, so now I pretty much just work, prepare some of my work and go to sleep – kind of a typical, boring life. But I kind of like it, because I felt that all that craziness in Kundu and the bars, it was just not myself. It felt so temporary.*

(Steve, twenties, Canadian; 01.09.2011)

Besides his full-time teaching job, he also does some tutoring, so his schedule is pretty tight (Steve, 01.09.2011). When Peter was still working at the Dutch flower trade company he used to leave at 7 o'clock in the morning and came back at 8'clock in the evening, which often did not even leave him enough time to go to the supermarket (Peter, 03.09.2011). Alex and Nena also described their daily routine as busy - especially for Alex who usually comes back from work at 7 o'clock in the evening. Nena is at home with the children; while they are in school and kindergarten, she goes shopping, takes care of the bills and after 4 p.m. when the

kids come home from school she helps them with their homework. As soon as that is done she is preparing dinner and later puts them in bed. On the weekends they are busy taking the children to Teak-kwon-do, swimming or dancing classes – all in all not leaving them much leisure time.

These examples show that living in Kunming does not necessarily make one lazy or means that one has too much free time, but that it is possible to maintain a similar lifestyle as in one's home country. Therefore it essentially depends on the expats themselves. Teaching English and working at so-called *monkey shows* enables expatriates to earn enough money to pay for their expenses, and often does not take up a lot of time and effort. I assume Kunming's expats usually describe it as "not having anything to do" instead of declaring it as boredom, this is due to the fact that in their home societies having a lot of leisure time is generally considered to be desirable. Furthermore, "not doing anything" and still being able to have a rather care-free and comfortable life in Kunming is not only relatively easy, but also quite common and accepted within the expat community.

### 4.3. Freedom and Safety

The large amount of free time and the rather carefree life expats can have in Kunming leads to a common belief of having more freedom in China than they would have back home.

*I like it here, I like my life here, I'm more free, I'm more easy. I don't have this depression. In Russia everybody is running for something more, job, money, whatever; but here I just don't care about this. I'm happy with my little money.*

(Katja, twenties, Russian; 19.08.2011)

It is interesting that the feeling of having a lot of freedom is expressed in regard to living in a country that is popularly associated with censorship and oppression by Western media. The notion of freedom is also often connected to the wide range of business opportunities, as previously indicated by the comment of an Italian expat on how *the Wild West has become the Wild East*. This was further elucidated by another English expat who had been living in Asia for more than twenty years and never had

problems obtaining visas without having any special qualifications. Francesca, on the other hand, qualified this common impression, by declaring it as a tool the government uses for social control.

*The feeling is to be freer here, but there's actually a social control, the same as back home. It's a tool the government uses, so people have the feeling that they are free, but I don't think they are.*

(Francesca, thirties, Italian; 25.08.2011)

Similarly, Gabriel mentioned that you only have as much freedom as the Chinese are willing to give you (Gabriel, 22.08.2011). The only one of my informants, who did not seem to share the common impression of having a lot of freedom at all, was Steve. When answering the question what he missed the most about Canada, he said freedom, *in terms of what you can do, where you can go*, as some areas are restricted by the government. Additionally, after many years of living alone, he is now staying with his parents again and has the impression that his mum is trying to control him (Steve, 01.09.2011). As Steve's example shows that close familial and social ties can be experienced as restrictive. Since most expats lack these, and the responsibility that come with them, I assume that the experience of freedom partly derived from the fact that they are in Kunming on their own. While the possibility to obtain jobs easily (e.g. teaching, modeling) that pay for the expenses and lacking a certain routine also adds to this feeling, choices are actually more limited than they are back home.

Another feeling that is shared by many expats is that of being safer in Kunming than back home. When Dave tried to explain what the main difference between living in China and England was, he said:

*It's a more relaxed place to live, you know. I mean, you get to walk around alone in China, like at two or three in the morning, no one's going to bother you, you never feel threatened. But in plenty of big cities in England, you have to watch yourself all the time. At two or three in the morning, there's nobody around, and you're thinking 'What if there are gangs? What are they gonna do?' So I'd say it's a more relaxed place than England.*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

This is not only surprising considering many would not even be able to call the police or ambulance in case something happened, but also contradicts the fact that the crime and accident rates are generally higher than in their countries of origin.

#### 4.4. Challenges and Restrictions

Restrictions are not only experienced in terms of access to areas or, as mentioned in the first part of this chapter, the ability to choose one's friends and peers; there is a wide range of challenges that expats have to face in the course of their daily lives, where other kinds of restrictions become apparent.

Anna, a German architect in her mid-thirties, is frequently confronted with sexist behavior and discrimination in her company. She had previously been in a relationship with an English guy working at her office, who then left her for one of the Chinese secretaries, one of the reasons she avoids hanging out with her colleagues after work. Setting up Chinese secretaries, who in her opinion also dress inappropriately for work, with male, foreign employees is, although not openly discussed, a common practice at her work place. When senior employees of the company and important business partners visit the office, only the male employees are being introduced to them; women have to sit in the back. If this would happen at her work place in Germany, she would take legal action, but here in China her hands are more or less tied.

Peter criticized the lack of protection by Chinese at his flower trading company. He said that the Chinese were very bad business partners in terms of paying and a lot of things were happening “*under the table*” (Peter, 03.11.2011). Insecurity in terms of payments, contracts and licenses particularly pertain to those expats who are running businesses in Kunming. Francesca said she had been disappointed with the Chinese authorities, thus finding business in China very unsure and so was uncertain how much longer she was able to keep the bar. The different licenses she gets, often do not match and the rent has doubled since it had opened. She explained that because of the increase of rent's notice is often only given one month in advance, her biggest problem was that it was hard to plan it advance. So there is not enough time to sell the place or move elsewhere. In addition, her lease had only been extended by two years, whereas when running a business, leases usually last for five to ten years; but being a foreigner in China there is no legal protection.

*What I miss most is the quality of life in terms of having access to better organized things. So, what I first told you about the contract, this contract in this place and it is true for many things in China, you don't have real rules to stick with, you know. But there is always a way to avoid them and so you never feel sure about things that you have to do. So the*

*reason is this backup of stress to keep things, while in Europe, things are more reliable in a way. Probably that's what I miss the most.*

(Francesca, 25.08.2011)

Joost confirmed this, saying that when running a bar in China, things were very uncertain. Laws can change all of a sudden and the next day government officials come in and ask you to pay 30,000 RMB and there is nothing you can do about it. He added that so far he had been lucky not to have been in a situation where he had to bribe someone (Joost, 26.10.2011).

Alex and Nena brought up the difficulties regarding medical care, which had been a particularly big issue for them a couple of years ago before the private, international clinics had opened in Kunming - their children were still very young and so more likely to get sick. They said they were happy they did not have to use the local public hospitals anymore, as they were very dirty and you did not have any privacy. Alex pointed out that they were lucky his company paid for their health insurance and despite the prevailing assumption amongst foreigners that China was a cheap place to live, if you are not sufficiently insured and need to be taken to hospital in case of an emergency, the treatment is overly expensive (Alex and Nena, 27.08.2011).

Not being able to communicate as they can back home is a challenge most expats face on a regular places. Dave stressed the importance of having at least a basic grasp of Chinese to be able to do the shopping or finding one's way at the railway station (Dave, 22.10.2011). Not being able to speak Chinese hinders not only in terms of integration<sup>25</sup>, but also leads to a feeling of dependency.

*One thing that I miss is independency. You are so dependent on other people here, whether it's about this thing [at work] or whether it's ordering my bottle of water, which I now can finally do by myself after a year. What will also be one of my own mistakes, that I didn't put enough attention into Chinese first.*

(Peter, twenties, Dutch; 03.11.2011)

Apart from these rather big issues expats have to face, the answers I received when asking them about the things they missed back home, the main focus was on the little things, such as easy shopping (instead of having to go to a range of different

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<sup>25</sup> This will be discussed in Chapter5.

supermarkets in order to get all the desired groceries), driving, the beach and the ocean, clean air and nature, English food and sitting in the park having a picnic.

#### 4.5. Bad China Days

Everybody has good and bad days. If bad days are provoked by or somehow connected to an irritation by the Chinese environment, expats throughout China commonly refer to them as “Bad China Days”. During the interview Gabriel picked up his self-published magazine called *No culture*, showed me an article dealing with this phenomenon and explained:

*On the good days you love it, on the bad days you hate it. The same thing can happen on each day.*

(Gabriel, 22.08.2011)

I have taken two excerpt of the article to further exemplify Gabriel’s statement. It illustrates how one and the same activity, in this case a walk to the supermarket, can be experienced different on each day. The first describes a so-called “Bad China Day”:

“I hear the word laowai 12 times. People behind me say hello, pronouncing it funny, but seem scared when I turn around (4 times). A mother holds up a little boy who is relieving himself on the sidewalk. The guy from the bike shop is draining oil into the gutter. Two city guards violently shoo away an elderly woman with a little child who are selling fried potatoes. All of the speakers the little clothes shops use to share their idea of hip music are hopelessly overdriven and sound like a mule under heavy torture. I don’t count the stares anymore.”

In comparison, this is how the same situation can be experienced on a good day:

“Five people I have never seen before say hello to me. They look me in the eyes while doing that, smiling. I reply politely. Three beautiful girls with long, shiny black hair and almond eyes give me a look only George Clooney deserves. I somehow walk slightly more erect. I am attacked by the myriads of smells and fragrances of myriads of varieties of street food and struggle hard to keep myself from stuffing myself with guōtiē<sup>26</sup>. I do not succeed.

I scare the living hell out of two little kids whose world is shaken to the foundations by the mere presence of something as hideously weird as me. Their grandma smiles at me. She’s 1.42m tall and, according to her wrinkles, 212 years old. I smile back.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Fried dumplings

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.noculture.asia/en/menu/articles/\\_12/strawberry?s=1#](http://www.noculture.asia/en/menu/articles/_12/strawberry?s=1#) (accessed February 28,2012)

Jeremy also mentioned that everybody who lives in China goes through times when you get irritated with China. About every six months, he explained, you go through a stage where you are irritated by small things: people shouting, the noise, bus queues, the spitting. After a while they can build up and you go through a period of two or three weeks when you hate China (Jeremy, 03.11.2011).

Taking a closer look at the everyday lives of Kunming's expats gives rise to the questions of why they stay in Kunming, despite all the challenges and restriction they have to face and whether migrating has actually led to an improvement in lifestyle. While the extensive amount of leisure time and the lack of routine is not entirely experienced as positive, moving somewhere else where one is forced to obtain a full-time job, is likely to face financial problems, and thus able to lead this kind of lifestyle anymore, is not a very tempting option. Thus concluding that moving to Kunming in many cases leads to a change rather than an actual improvement in lifestyle, and that is more often the fear of going back to "the real world" (Gabriel 22.08.2011) than the contentment with this change that prevents them from leaving.



## 5. Community and Boundaries

In his study on expatriate communities, Erik Cohen concluded that “[t]he strangeness of a foreign environment is the key element in the expatriate’s experience as well as the principal problem with which he and his community have to cope” (Cohen 1977:15). All kinds of migrants and travelers undergo this “experience of strangeness” to a certain degree, depending on how much they desire and are able to overcome it (Ibid.). This chapter seeks to illustrate how expats in Kunming experience the strangeness of the Chinese society, their abilities and obstacles to integrate in it and the boundaries that are therefore being drawn between the local and the expat scenes. It will also be discussed why one can speak of an expat community, what kind of mechanisms underlie the emergence of a ‘community feeling’ and the boundaries that exist within the expat community itself.

### 5.1. The Chinese „Other“

In the last chapter I have already described what kind of challenges expatriates are facing when living in Kunming. In order to fully understand the mechanisms of the expat community and the underlying assumption of having a shared culture and identity, it is important to look at the attitudes and opinions they hold against China and its society and population. It has been pointed out on several occasions that Kunming’s expatriates evinces a rather high interest and knowledge in Chinese culture and language and many of its members maintain intimate relationships and friendships with the Chinese locals. When talking about “the Chinese” the statements stay on a more abstract level concerning the Chinese system and society in general, rather than referring to certain occasions and experiences with them. Especially in face-to-face conversations, statements about “the Chinese” were often qualified and generalizations were avoided. So, for example Joost, who mentioned that his biggest challenge was his wife - he said Chinese were different than Dutch; while he was very easy going, Chinese girls could really work themselves up into something and make a big scene out of it, thereby rhetorically asking himself whether this was a

cultural or a personal problem (Joost, 26.10.2011). Francesca also tried to be very careful about blaming all differences and misunderstandings on the notion of culture.

*I mean, it's true that there is a cultural basis that gives differences to people, but the more I went into details, or the more I stay here and meet new people, the more I think maybe it's more of a personal thing than a cultural thing.*

(Francesca, thirties, Italian; 25.08.2011)

Expatriates generally avoid stressing ethnicity and cultural differences and comments about “the Chinese” usually pertain to values and characteristics of the Chinese society as a whole. They primarily criticize the overall striving for money and success, as well as a lack of individualism, freedom and security. During a conversation between two Australians at a bar one night, that addressed these topics, contains the common impressions many expats have of Chinese society:

Josh, whose parents are Chinese, said that the main goal here is to make money and the reason for that was that they do not have any social welfare system to back them up. *“Chinese are small. They are not the fastest runners, not the fastest swimmers, so they have to be good at something else. They are really good at copying things, that's the way they were brought up.”* Steve said he used to call it a “one-up” society; the whole societies resembles the way the taxi drivers drive here, always trying to get ahead of the next one. (Field Notes, 02.11.2011)

Steve's impression is similar, saying that the Chinese are living some sort of robotic, mechanical life that follows a certain scheme: they get married, have kids, work hard, try to make more money and get promoted – *like a crazy rat trying to climb up the ladders* – but do not know how to enjoy life. In his opinions, this is also reflected in their drinking behavior, frequently criticized by a lot of expats; instead of relaxing and enjoying their drinks when at a bar, they buy a whole case of beer or bottles of wine, which they just quickly drink it order to get drunk. He identifies a sense of insecurity as the main reason for this. He had been looking at some dating websites and detected that this insecurity is well reflected in the way Chinese people choose their partners: women are looking for men who can guarantee them financial security, whereas men attach more importance on a woman's family background and education. Although Steve noted that in his opinion there is nothing wrong with that, he finds it a little irritating that marriages seem to be more a result of extensive research and the compliance of certain rules, rather than love (Steve, 01.09.2011).

*I'm sure people are expecting a kind of stable life, but I know in China the government cannot provide them with free health care and a stable housing rate. I think that's what is causing people to feel nervous, worried and restless about life, to never give up on things*

*and just keep working harder and harder for their things. If they don't do it, they don't have any security in life.*

(Steve, twenties, Canadian; 01.09.2011)

Steve, who is working as an English teacher, also criticized what he calls the *English fashion*. He has observed that Chinese parents would do almost anything to have their kids learn English and to get them trained in a foreign country. In his opinion, many of them do not even know why they need to speak English or whether their child actually wants to learn it; it is more of a trend: *If the other kid knows English, my kid must have good English too*. Making friends with Western foreigners appears to be convenient and a popular means to improve one's English skills. Although in general Steve finds Chinese people very welcoming and warm, he notes that he cannot really figure out what they really think and is never sure whether their friendliness is not based on a hidden agenda. He had times when he was invited out for dinner and ultimately only wanted him to teach English for free (Steve, 01.09.2011). The longer expatriates have been living in China, the more they get annoyed by Chinese people approaching them for the purpose of learning English.

After we had ordered some drinks we sat down in a corner, and it only took about one minute until one of the Chinese guys sitting on the table next to ours started talking to Diego. He told him that he had studied English, works in a bank now and tries to *"catch every chance that he has to speak English, because he never gets the chance to at work"*. He then tried to start a conversation with us, but we weren't too interested. Lisa watched Diego for a while and said: *"You can tell that he [Diego] hasn't been in China for a long time. In the first couple of months, after I had arrived here, I'd always talk to them. But after a while you just get bored, because you always have the same conversations: 'Hello, where are you from? What is your name? What do you study?' and then you don't know what else to talk about."* (Field Notes, 12.08.2011)

Expats are often bothered by the feeling that many Chinese have a hidden agenda when trying to talk or make friends with them; this also leads to a common assumption that Chinese have a different understanding or conception of friendship. Certain mistrust was also expressed by Katja:

*Also when they make friends; they don't think about friendship, they start to think 'How can I use this person?' Also the first questions they'll ask you, except for something normal like if you like the food, are 'What are you doing here?', 'What kind of job do you have?', 'What position, how much money do you get a month?' I think when you meet a person for the first time these kinds of questions are not polite.*

(Katja, twenties, Russian; 19.08.2011)

The criticized strive for success and improvement of one's social position is therefore not only something that expatriates simply observe, but it has an immediate effect on their relationship with the local population. Joost expressed the wish that the Chinese should become as open and relaxed as many foreigners who live in Kunming. His explanation as to why they were a lot more worrying is that they are raised in a different way (Joost, 26.10.2011). Jeremy also justifies annoyances and differences by referring to the different education.

*I think overall when you first come here, or in my experience, a lot of times when you come from a Western developed country, where things might appear to be kind of rude and annoying, but essentially it's a different education. And I think one thing that I take from Chinese culture is an overall sense of tolerance. People get on with things, people do things, there's never anything too difficult. First small example, you see someone down the street with an electric bike with two TVs and three things of water in it. If that was in the UK we would just stand and complain about thing. In our society we believe in hierarchy, that we have the divine right to justice. But I think in Chinese society it's more about tolerance, you just get on with things and do the best.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

In opposition to the irritation with the competitiveness and striving for financial and social security by the Chinese middle-class, Jeremy's comment suggests that the desire of improving one's life and coping with difficulties by those who are worse off is on the other hand is considered to be a positive aspect of Chinese culture. Dave expressed his admiration for the Chinese working on the rice patties in the countryside:

*But the Chinese can do it, because they've always done it, this is the way life is and this is the way it's always been, so they do it, you know. But I admire them for it, I admire their mental strength, that they can do this and they can actually go home feeling happy about it. Most Western people would be exhausted, you know, 'fuck this' and all that (laughs). Because we're soft, you know, we are. I don't just mean me and you, our generation, I mean. We don't have this physical labour like they have here.*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

I assume that the reason many expatriates are irritated by the Chinese attaching great importance to wealth and social status, is the fact that they have left their home countries to escape this sort of pressure. The values they criticize are essentially western middle-class values which after the country's economic reforms and opening-up have increasingly become embraced by the Chinese population. Furthermore it is important to point out that these values are mainly promoted by

middle-class Chinese, to which the majority of locals expatriates have contact with are part of and who also show a great interest and admiration for the West. The way of life led by lower class Chinese and peasants in the countryside on the other hand is met with admiration. The often romanticized view on the ability to work hard and to make a living out of basically nothing are considered to be somehow missing in Western countries nowadays. Even though they would have the financial means, expatriates often put up with lower living standards compared to many middle-class Chinese, but consider as an experience and opportunity for self-development. "There is an irony in the fact that the 'simple' lifestyles which these migrants have the luxury to pursue are lives led out of necessity by their hosts, who would often happily give them up in favour of the more privileged lives of the migrants." (O'Reilly and Benson 2009:8)

## **5.2. Integration and Acculturation**

Kreutzer and Roth (2006:20) describe the relations expatriates hold with their host society as a process of acculturation. In order to be able to understand the experiences of strangeness, they partially and temporarily try to adapt certain norms and patterns of the host society. As a result, this process of "taking on" leads to a partially and temporarily "letting go" of one's own cultural identity. Migrants are therefore going back and forth between segregation and integration. After they have overcome the first "culture shock", migrants usually show great interest in engaging with the host society that sooner or later leads to an experience of strangeness and marginalization and the retraction into the expat community. The following phase of separation and segregation helps migrants reassure themselves of their own identity and gather enough confidence to regain contact and engagement with the host society (Ibid.:22). This constant shift between separation and integration can be illustrated well in the case of Katja. After her arrival she first went through a short phase of irritation, mainly because she did not speak any Chinese and little English and was not used to eating spicy food. She started taking Chinese classes at the university, where she met other foreigners she got along with, but spent most of her time on her studies. Her first perception of the Chinese was utterly positive:

*Now I can understand them, but before they were smiling all the time and I was thinking 'they are so good, they are so friendly'.*

(Katja, twenties, Russian; 19.08.2011)

The first year of intensive studying and engagement with the Chinese culture, was then followed by a phase of separation. She explained that she got lazy, had more interest in going out to clubs with other foreign friends and simply wanted to enjoy her life. Her best friend at that time was from Brazil, but after she had left Katja spent most of her time with Chinese friends. She had the feeling that she had to improve her level of Chinese and also tried to understand them culturally wise, but is now *back to foreigners* (Katja, 19.08.2011).

*Before I tried to understand the Chinese people, how they're thinking, how they are, see their life and everything. Of course I don't really understand them now, but a little bit better and I think I don't like their lifestyle. I think I prefer to stay with foreigners.*

(Katja, 19.08.2011)

Among the reasons as why she does not like their lifestyle, her impressions are that the Chinese cared too much about money and social status, but also the patriarchal structures of Chinese society. She had been in a relationship with a Chinese before and was extremely bothered by the fact that men are considered to be of higher status and importance within the family. When she talked about the common practice of aborting female fetuses in China she got a little upset and concluded: *I will never understand these people* (Katja, 19.08.2011).

The difficulty of understanding "the Chinese" was also mentioned by Steve. Despite being ethnic Chinese and speaking the language perfectly, he often feels misunderstood by his Chinese friends. When he meets them for dinner, the conversations mainly revolve about their curiosity of foreigners and foreign countries. He feels that he cannot discuss any of his fundamental concerns, as they would not understand them (Steve, 01.09.2011).

*I felt kinda distant from the people here, because I look Asian, but on the other hand, when I'm having conversations with them, I couldn't fit in. I don't really get what they're trying to say, I don't know how to fill in the gap. I felt desynchronized with their youth culture here, with the people around me.*

(Steve, twenties, Canadian; 01.09.2011)

Yet he emphasized the importance of trying to take on local patterns and making an effort to better understand them in order to be able to integrate into Chinese society.

Like Katja, he had spent most of his time with other foreigners in the early period of his stay:

*I had a point when I was at a crossroad. When I hung out with the expats here I felt 'okay, everything is similar' – the way we care about things, the way we talk, it was very much like back home; but then again, that's not gonna get you far in China. Because if you want to survive here, you gotta meet the locals and the locals don't do it the way you do it back home. If you carry on the old pattern, you're not gonna go far in China. You are still a foreigner, you are still a tourist, you are still not part of the society. You are still alienated from here.*

(Steve, 01.09.2011)

According to Jeremy the basic prerequisites for integration into Chinese society are a positive attitude and the readiness to embrace different aspects of the host culture. He has the impression that a lot of foreigners come to China thinking they can change the way people think and know things better, but that was not the attitude to take. In his experience, the Chinese have generally been very open and supportive in terms of letting him be part of their society. Katja similarly explained that it did not make sense trying to change the Chinese society, but to accept things the way they are. In her opinion, my foreigners do not even make an effort to comprehend the way Chinese society works, but instead complain and, although voluntarily living in Kunming, give the impression that they do not like it.

*I think they don't really care about anything when they stay here in China. They just have fun and most of them don't really like China and they talk about this too much. Sure, there are things that I don't like, but I don't talk about it all the time. It's my decision to stay here, so I should be okay with it, right? If I want to stay here, I try to understand. Of course I cannot change them.*

(Katja, twenties, Russian; 19.08.2011)

Most expatriates I talked to claimed to feel integrated into their host society and stressed having a lot of Chinese friends. This reflects the common presumption “that migrants should integrate, assimilate or acculturate into the dominant culture, and that if they do not, if they retain a strong sense of ethnic community and identity [...] it is potentially a situation of conflict” (O'Reilly 2000:116). The limitations they experience on integration are commonly blamed on the structure of Chinese society or the difficulty of the Chinese language. Albert, an English expatriate who had been married with a Chinese but did not speak much Chinese, said that Chinese society was very closed – they would let you in to a certain point but then shut you out. One

night when Gabriel and I shared a taxi to *Wenlin Jie*, he complained that it was impossible to integrate into Chinese society. I then reminded him of telling me in the interview that he had a lot of Chinese friends here. He then further explained that they did not really let him into the Chinese culture, but only showed them their Westernized side. Having local friends, or even having a Chinese partner, thus does not automatically guarantee permanent integration into Chinese society. Most expatriates maintain relationships and friendships with local Chinese who speak good English, have been living or travelling in Western countries and have close ties to the expat community in general. Although expats frequently expose themselves to situations in which they are the only foreigners, e.g. when visiting their family-in-law or spending time with Chinese people, who are not (as Gabriel put it) “Westernized”, they keep returning to the comforts of the expat community. Integrating only partially and temporarily into the Chinese society is not only due to an incomprehension of understanding their lifestyle and “way of thinking”, but also the language barrier. Many expats find it tiring to carry on long conversations in Chinese; of course this depends on their language skills as well.

Dave excused himself for not spending much time with Chinese locals by not being able to express himself in Chinese. He has been taking Chinese classes and, according to him, speaks it well enough to have a simple conversation, but thinks it is impossible to be fluent unless you have a degree in it. Since for him speaking Chinese requires a high level of concentration and patience, and often leads to misunderstandings, he cannot really enjoy it (Dave, 22.10.2011).

*I'm always around English speaking people – not because I'm a racist, it's just easier, especially when you express yourself in your own language. My friends are English and American. But it's not a racist thing, it's the pressure. If you wanna speak with someone in your own language, you come here [Salvador's], or you go to the Mask, or to Camel. Obviously, speaking your own language, you can say exactly what you wanna say and that's it, you know. You can't do that in Chinese.*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

The separation from Chinese society and the integration into the expat community is something many expats feel they need to justify, it is simultaneously considered to be something completely natural.

*So you integrate with the people you are closest to and they are usually foreigners.*

(Gabriel, twenties, English; 22.08.2011)

The justification for spending a lot of time with other foreigners goes hand in hand with emphasizing the diversity of nationalities and age within the expat community. It gives them the opportunity to meet new people with different backgrounds and life stories, or as some expats like to put it, *there are quite a lot of characters*. Moreover, since the dominant language in the expat community is English, those who are native speakers claim to benefit from spending time with other foreigners. Not using these opportunities is therefore often met with incomprehension.

*It's weird how some stick together. I don't see many English people sticking together with English people, but I do see groups of Israelis, groups of French, groups of Americans, and so on. I guess you take comfort in what you know; that's the main thing.*

(Gabriel, 22.08.2011)

### 5.3. The Expatriate “Other”

Gabriel's comment already suggests that separation and segregation not only exists in relation to the Chinese society but also among the expats themselves. As I have outlined in the second chapter the expat scene can be divided into two areas of the city (the Green Lake area and the *Beichen* area in the North) as well as into sub-communities that are based on their members' nationality/language and the length and purpose of their stay.

*I think it [the expat community] can be divided into characters. You get your obvious kind of people who spend most of their time on Wenlin Jie, who don't speak Chinese, who spend the majority of their time in the expat community; and you have the people who are here with a function to study, who do integrate and who are probably only here for maybe one or two years. And then you have the long-termers, who are probably fully integrated, who are married, have kids and maybe have a business. Those are the people you might not often see around this area [Green Lake area], their life is here; it's not temporary.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

Expats can also be distinguished by their degree of integration into Chinese society, which is considered to go hand in hand with their ability to speak the language. Since the expats generally like to think of themselves as at least partially integrated and claim to make an effort to regularly practice their Chinese, they readily use those foreigners who spend a lot of time on *Wenlin Jie* as a counterpart. When I mentioned

my research, I was often told that I should focus on *the expats that hang out in front of Salvador's every night*. The general assumption about them is that they have no relations whatsoever to the Chinese society and none or only basic knowledge of the Chinese language. References to this group were frequently followed by comments of pity or incomprehension. Joost, for example, said that he did not understand why they were in China at all (Joost, 26.10.2011). It is interesting though, that expats who are considered belonging to this group reckon to be some kind of experts on China and frequently make fun of other expats, particularly business expats, who in their opinion know nothing about Chinese language and culture.

While sub-communities based on nationality and a common language do exist in Kunming, they have no institutional anchoring in forms of expatriate clubs. They are more or less a result of personal friendships relationships and social interaction within these groups first and foremost takes place on a private level. They are sometimes supported by events designed to gather expats who speak the same language, such as the weekly *Soirée Tarot pour les francophones* at the French-owned *Game Café* on *Wenlin Jie* or the former *German corner* at a German-owned restaurant in *Beichen*. These events are only exclusive in the sense that the participant is expected to speak the language, but neither has to hold a certain nationality nor has to be a native speaker of the particular language. According to my observation, the likeliness of expats huddling together with expats sharing the same nationality or language corresponds with their English skills. Some expats deliberately do not want to be associated with others of the same nationality. Katja for example explained that the Russians have a reputation of behaving badly and therefore prefers to stay away from them (Katja, 19.08.2011).

#### 5.4. The Expat Community

After outlining the different dynamics of relationships between expatriates and the Chinese locals, and among expatriates themselves, I now seek to explain what roles they play in the construction of an expat community. Amit (2002:13) notes that “we often find notions of community offering a convenient conceptual haven, a location

from which to safely circumscribe potentially infinite webs of connection.” In the case of expatriate communities the notion of community is commonly used as an umbrella term spanning the whole expat sector with its different locations and sub-communities and groups. Its meaning and the sense and level of membership are therefore contextual. As the expatriate sector is more or less concentrated on certain areas of the city, the “experiences of communality arise [...] out of the more or less limited interactions afforded by a variety of circumstantial associations” (Ibid.:58) and the recognition of similarities, such as language, interests and experiences. The areas where interactions take place are however not segregated from the Chinese environment. Therefore, one of these experiences on which the discourse of “being part of a ‘community’” is based on, is their experience of strangeness within the Chinese society leading to generating a collective identity as ‘Westerners’ (Fechter 2007:104f). “They understand this ‘Western-ness’ to mean, above all, having certain kinds of education and knowledge of certain popular culture in addition to sharing certain values – above all individuality” (Korpela 2009:18). Although, when directly addressed, the existence of cultural differences is often deemphasized, the reference to “the Chinese”, and the homogenized images it implies, provides them with a symbolic boundary and adds to the assertion of the boundaries of their own identity and ethnicity (O’Reilly 2000:93f).

As illustrated above, boundaries do not exist only in relation to the Chinese “Other”, but also within the expat community itself. According to Farrer (2010:1125) Western communities in China are highly stratified “with internal boundaries framed in stereotypes such as the ‘loser’ English teacher or the rootless ‘expat’.” In Kunming, examples for the existence of these internal boundaries are diverse: they exist between those who live around the Green Lake area and those who live in *Beichen*; students and long-termers; business expats and English teachers; co-nationals and those who are not; young and old, missionaries and the rest; etc. Subgroups and friendship circles also give expatriates the opportunity to gossip and release “built-up tensions and disaffections” (Cohen 1977:55). It is important to note, though, that both internal and external boundaries “are in flux and can be constructed, reconstructed, deconstructed, imagined or denied according to individual and group needs, according to context, and according to the presence or not of a visible ‘Other’” (O’Reilly 2000:119), whether it may be the Chinese or the expatriate “Other”. The expatriate community is therefore less of an ethnic community than a symbolic

community that can best be understood in terms of networks and the symbolic construction of boundaries (Ibid.:118). Rather than being caused by residential or social segregation, “the identity and sense of community arises in the course of, and is conceptualized in terms of particular forms of social interaction” (Amit 2002:60) within the expat sector, which is commonly referred to as “environmental bubble” (Cohen 1977:16).

### 5.5. Living in a gap

Like tourists, who prefer to stay in a familiar environment when observing their host country, expatriates are not necessarily “more willing or capable to expose themselves to the host environment” (Ibid.) and similarly tend to surround themselves with the comforts of an “environmental bubble”. While the tourist establishment provides this for the tourist, expatriates often need to create it for themselves. The structure of the “environmental bubble” thus depends on the tightness of the boundaries between the expat community and the host society, their autarky and their institutional establishments. Although all expatriate communities are likely to establish these “bubbles”, not all expatriates seek its comforts to the same extent (Ibid.) Whereas some expatriates basically never leave it, others who spend most of their time in the host society use it as a means for recreation and tension-release (Ibid.:38). Erik Cohen notes the reasons for the creation of an “environmental bubble” are firstly the fact that expatriates are transients, and secondly that their economic and social privilege enables them to change the environment according to their needs (Ibid.:33).

“It is from the relative security and familiarity of the ‘environmental bubble’ of the ecological and institutional system of the expatriate community that the average individual expatriate ventures into the strangeness of the host society and draws strength and support to cope with it.”(Ibid.:37)

In Kunming the comforts of an “environmental bubble” are essentially provided by the foreign-owned restaurants and bars, imported grocery stores and international clinics located around the areas of *Wenlin Jie* and *Beichen*. They provide expats with spaces that are not entirely unfamiliar and in which they are not required to speak Chinese. While these spaces are neither spatially nor socially separated from the Chinese environment, they also do not challenge Western foreigners to leave their

comfort zones and give them the opportunity to develop a lifestyle that “is more affluent, richer in varied leisure activities and more artificially ‘exotic’ than it would be, for the same people, at home” (Cohen 1977:39f). As mentioned throughout this paper, this lifestyle, particularly in reference to spending a lot of time on *Wenlin Jie*, is often considered to be somehow “unreal”, or as a young Scottish expat put it: *Sitting at Salvador’s is like being stuck at the airport*. The existence of some sort of “environmental bubble” is widely acknowledged by expats in Kunming, but not all of them want or are able to take refuge in it to the same degree.

*I think you can use it as a bubble, but I think it depends on how you decide to live your life and what you do. But I think essentially it could be a bubble, although Kunming has the qualities that make it that. But you can make a bubble out of anywhere.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

Francesca stated that when she first came here to study she had the feeling of living inside a “bubble”, but now that she has worked here for a long time, she does not feel it anymore. However she understands why other people would claim they do, since living in Europe or America and finding a job that pays for one’s expenses is a lot more stressful than it is in Kunming (Francesca, 25.08.2011). Others reject the notion of the ‘bubble’ completely:

*“There is a gap. I think because of the language basically, but wherever you go there is no way around that. That’s the way it is. I wouldn’t say it’s a bubble.”*

(Dave, fifties, English; 22.10.2011)

Anne-Maike Fechter employed the notion of “gap” to describe the expat community in Jakarta. She suggests that the image of living in a “gap” is more accurate than that of a “bubble”. It describes their position of being distant from their home country and not being fully nor permanently integrated in the host society, but acknowledges their effort to engage with it (2007:143). They are not only willing to expose themselves to the host environment, but also willing to incorporate elements of the host culture in their lifestyle. It is therefore a mistake to assume that the lifestyle they create abroad resembles the one they have when living at home – it is a hybrid community that adopts different elements into its lifestyle (Cohen 1977:39)

### 5.5.1. Third, transnational culture

According to Kreutzer and Roth (2006:23), expats are in constant flux between their own culture and that of their host society. They are hence likely to develop a so-called “third, transnational culture”, a hybrid mix of different cultural elements and usually strongly marked by the dominant Anglo-American culture. In the course of my fieldwork I noticed a range of indications for the existence of such a “third, transnational culture” in Kunming’s expat community. They have developed certain traditions such as the *Back to School*-Party, which has been taking place every October in the past 6-7 years. The biggest event for expats in Kunming, however, seems to be Halloween. Every year a group of people organize a “Pub Crawl”, starting on *Wenlin Jie* and traditionally finishes in a foreign-owned club in the area of *Kundu Night Market*. The celebration of this event also reflects the strong Anglo-American influence. In 2011 the date of Halloween fell on a Tuesday; to make the attendance more convenient for those who work and study, the event took place on the preceding Saturday. This led to discontentment of many American expats for whom Halloween is a traditional holiday and celebration of their home culture. The majority, however, did not care when the party took place, since they did not traditionally celebrate Halloween at home and therefore could not understand the complaints, as long as the party took place at all. Another event that has regularly taken place during the last years is the *Oktoberfest*, where German sausages and beer are served. Anglo-American elements are widely considered and accepted to be typical “Western” elements, particularly by Chinese people. They are also well reflected in terms of the dishes offered at foreign-owned restaurants. Although the menus are strongly characterized by the owner’s nationality, almost all of them serve typical “Western” dishes such as hamburgers, French fries and sandwiches. Besides a long list of different Western elements, they also embrace certain Chinese aspects and events into their culture. During the Moon Festival, for example, many foreign-owned bars organize parties and serve traditional Chinese moon cakes. Furthermore, a range of Chinese expressions like *laowai*, is incorporated in the vocabulary of expats. I have noticed that while this “third, transnational culture” that emerges within the expat community can be taken on by all members regardless of the length of their stay, and to some extent also by Chinese people, it is strongly influenced and sustained by long-term expats.

## 6. Experiences of Privilege

*I think in the country side, there's still a lot of respect for foreigners, for white people, we're still respected, given positions of responsibility. We walk into society on a fairly high level, which we wouldn't, or a lot of us wouldn't, at least in our hometown.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

### 6.1. Privilege and Whiteness

Besides transiency, Cohen (1977:17) identifies their relatively privileged status as the second principal factor that shape expatriates experiences of strangeness. Unlike most other migrants, they do not lose but actually even gain status and by entering the host society and are able to maintain a more comfortable lifestyle than they would have in their home countries (Ibid.:22). "It follows that ordinary people, who do not stand out at home, suddenly come to entertain a status in the host society, owing to the colour of their skin" (Ibid.:23).

So far the majority of studies dealing with the concept of whiteness have focused on strategies whites employ to maintain their presumed, privileged and dominant position in "white" societies. Privileges in relation to whiteness are often denied and it is prevailingly considered to be unproblematic and "natural" (Hurtado and Stewart 2004:318). To complement the examination of whiteness, it is thus important to analyze how 'whites' experience their whiteness and acknowledge the privileges that it entails in predominantly non-white societies (Fechter 2005:87). The realization of being the racially 'other' can be very uncomfortable and disconcerting experience for expatriates. "Whiteness is not even seen as a 'race' at all, since the notion of 'race' seems to refer only to non-whites." (Ibid.:97) In order to constitute the arena in which such moments of 'other-ing' take place, Fechter adopts the concept of 'Asian Public Space' - spaces in which expatriates are confronted with the Asian society and have to negotiate with it (Ibid.:91). These spaces are mainly occupied by non-whites; the awareness of whiteness is however not only gained by self-perception of being

different, but first and foremost by practices of 'other-ing', specifically staring, pointing fingers at white foreigners and calling them *laowai*.

Expatriates in Kunming are confronted with these practices on a nearly daily basis, and therefore did not seem to find it worth mentioning it anymore. While the experience of these practices of 'other-ing' and the acknowledgement of one's own 'racial' difference are particularly uncomfortable for new-comers, those who have been in China for a while largely ignore it or have found their own strategies of dealing with them. Since staring, pointing fingers and calling people names are usually considered to be rude and impolite, the expatriates' responses to these practices often intend to make the Chinese vis-à-vis aware of the rudeness of their actions and feel uncomfortable about them. This is either done by acting rude as well (e.g. sticking out the tongue) or by meeting them with politeness (e.g. smiling and waving at them). These practices are also commonly taken as examples for the savageness of the Chinese. Expatriate areas, however, provide them with a space where the 'white other' is fairly common sight and practices of 'other-ing' take place less frequently. Staying in these areas thus leads to the assumption that Chinese people in Kunming do not stare so much as in other cities (Dave, 22.10.2011). While staring and being called *laowai* can contribute to the disaffection with the Chinese environment felt on so-called "Bad China Days", the expats' irritation with them cannot simply be explained by the acknowledgement of their whiteness. I actually argue that expats in Kunming are not only aware of their otherness as 'whites', but to a large extent also of the privileges that are related to it. Good examples for this are the so-called *monkey shows* and modeling jobs. Expats in Kunming usually do not deny that the reason for these job offers and the relatively high salary can basically be reduced to their white face. Jeremy, for example, is using his free time to work as a DJ and had been invited to play gigs at clubs and festivals all over China, but admit that this did not happen solely because of his DJ skills:

*Essentially you are there because you've got a white face. Your face is on the flyer and that's basically the sole function. You might be kicked off after 30 minutes but you are there, because of your face and what it represents and how it looks on a poster.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

The amount of expats in Kunming is still quite little compared to major cities like Shanghai or Beijing, but the demand for white 'models' to welcome guests at events, 'actors' and 'actresses' to play in TV productions (mainly war movies) and musicians to play at expos and shop openings, is rapidly growing and different local agents often compete for one and the same job; expats are thus in a even more privileged position, in which they can bargain for their salary and chose the agent that offers the highest pay. While they on one hand most readily take these advantages and try to make as much money as possible out of it, they simultaneously complain about the unfairness and injustice of getting paid the double amount of money (or even more) than the Chinese people who do the same job. Joost, for example, mentioned that he usually gets paid 700-800 RMB, but would also do it for 500 RMB. Once he and some other expats got paid 700 RMB each for only playing two songs, whereas the Chinese models they hired to work all day only got paid 50 RMB. What irritated him was not only the unfairness in salary but also the fact they did not even look at them; they only needed them because being able to hire foreigners reflects the status of a company (Joost, 26.10.2011). Also Peter, who had been working in high management position at a Dutch flower company he did not feel qualified for and hence quit, marked that this could only happen because he had *the right color* (Peter, 03.11.2011).

Complaints about privileged treatment due to one's skin color are not only expressed in regard to a considerably higher salary for jobs, but also in regard to the range of discounts and special services 'whites' receive in Chinese-owned bars and clubs. A handful of clubs on *Kundu Night Market* try to attract more expat costumers by providing them with VIP cards and free drinks. Joost, who runs a bar close to *Kundu* himself, explained that he preferred having Chinese costumers; firstly they spend more money and secondly they would never bring drinks that they bought outside. As the reason for also trying to attract foreign costumers he stated, that Chinese people love *laowais* and if there are a lot of foreigners at a place, they want go there (Joost, 26.10.2011).

## 6.2. Privilege and Cultural Capital

As noted above, expatriates are the only migrants who actually gain status by entering their host society. Their experiences of privilege, however, can not solely be reduced to whiteness; thanks to their descent from western countries they also possess what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as 'cultural capital', respectively 'linguistic capital'. Most properties of this form of capital, such as culture, language and education, are assumed to be closely linked to the individual person; the accumulation of cultural capital thus "presupposes a process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor." (Bourdieu 1986:244) Unlike economic and social capital, the acquisition and transmission of cultural capital are often disguised and not consciously discerned by its possessor; it is therefore more likely to be accepted as a competence rather than a form of capital (Ibid.:245).

In her study on Western, high-skilled migrants living in Taiwan, Pei-Chia Lan (2011) argues that "English-speaking Westerners can convert their native-language proficiency, as hegemonic linguistic and cultural capital, into symbolic prestige and economic and social capital in the global South" (Lan 2011:1670), and uses the concept of "flexible cultural capital conversion" to describe this process. As I have mentioned before, teaching English is not only a very common occupation for expats, regardless of their origin, in Kunming, but positions at local educational institutions are also relatively easy to obtain. While salary depends on their English-speaking proficiency and training, it is nevertheless disproportionately high compared to that of well-trained Chinese teachers. As Lan (Ibid.) points out cultural and linguistic capital is also highly racialized – English teachers are expected to have white skin and certain accents (e.g. British and American) are considered to be more 'proper' than others (e.g. South African). The connectedness of whiteness and linguistic capital can be exemplified by an observation I have made during my first stay in Kunming: A Kazakh student, who due to her looks had often been mistaken for a Chinese, applied for an English teaching position at a local school and could already feel a sense of disappointment and rejection when she arrived for the job interview. The position was later given to a white, Spanish expat whose English skills were a lot

lower than hers. This also reflects the common assumption of the Chinese, that any white foreigner is able to speak fluent English.

Expatriates in Kunming are usually aware of the fact that they are in a privileged position due to their white skin and western descent. While they willingly acknowledge these components as the sole reason why they are hired for modeling jobs and so-called *monkey shows*, in regard to teaching positions they, however, often feel the need to justify themselves, i.e. identifying their cultural and linguistic capital as competences (Bourdieu 1986: 245). Jeremy, for example, explained that he became aware of his privileged position as a western foreigner in China when he obtained his first teaching position. He was twenty-four at that time and did not really have any experience in teaching; yet he was given more freedom in terms of creating the lessons and got paid twice as much as Chinese teachers who had been teaching for twenty year (Jeremy, 03.11.2011).

*There have been times when you're working in a job, like the situation I explained, people who are qualified teachers who have been doing it for twenty years and never do anything else. Well, it had bothered me. But again, I think it's down to how you behave. If you know you're getting this money, if you know you've got this opportunity, then if you take that on board, for example with teaching, and you do try and offer something different, I've had it justified to me all along the way that one of the reasons why foreigners were earning so much money is because our education costs more. That sounds good and I don't know if I necessarily agree with it, but I think if you make sure your classes are good, if you make sure you're offering something, if you make sure that you feel like you're earning it, then you can feel comfortable about it. I guess it's about giving something back. I mean, I'm making money here and I make quite a good amount of money, but I feel like I've earned this position – I have spent all my money here and I integrate into the culture.*

(Jeremy, thirties, English; 03.11.2011)

Another common way for expats to transform cultural into economic capital is entrepreneurship, most commonly by opening a bar or a restaurant. They not only provide other expatriates with a space of familiarity to take refuge from Chinese society, but also offer “cultural products” to Chinese costumers - “Western cuisine and lifestyle” (Lan 2011:1683). As noted in the previous chapter locals commonly seek contact with Western foreigners to practice English; in addition to that, socializing with members of the expat community also give locals the opportunity to gain what Lan terms “cosmopolitan cultural capital”. In the context of contemporary

China, the disposition over a broad knowledge of the English language and Western culture are associated with wealth and a high social status (Ibid.:1684). Cultural capital can therefore not only be transferred into economic capital, but also social capital, i.e. romance and marriage.

“A native romantic partner constitutes an essential type of intimate network and social capital for foreigners, serving as a language and cultural translator, a local guarantor for obtaining services and renting apartments, and an agent who assists in negotiation with locals when conflicts and problems occur.” (Ibid.:1685)

This process of transformation is however not only highly racialized, but also engendered as it is primarily white men who received a lot of attention from Chinese women(Ibid.).

As this chapter has demonstrated, being white and disposing of cultural capital allows expats to maintain a relatively high and privileged status within Chinese society and enable them to access well-paid teaching posts and part-time jobs. It nevertheless has to be noted that these positions, that are essentially based on skin color and cultural background function “as a double-edged sword that places white foreigners in lucrative, privileged, yet segregated, ghettoized job niches.” (Ibid.:1670)

## 7. Conclusion

My interest in expats and privileged migration aroused during my first stay in Kunming as a language student. As already illustrated in the beginning I had often watched the group of expats sitting in front of *Salvador's Coffee House* on a near daily basis and could not help asking myself the question: *Who are these people and what do they do here?* It was quite obvious to me right from the beginning that Kunming's expat community was very different in many respects from those researched and described in social sciences. I nevertheless refer to Westerners living in Kunming as expats (which is also a common self-designation) adopting Ulf Hannerz (1996:106) definition as people who voluntarily move abroad for a while and are in the position to go back home whenever they want to. Despite the particularities in its composition, I expected to meet an expat community made up of a people, who might be diverse in regard of nationality, age and occupation, but who all share a feeling of irritation towards their host society dominating their stay in Kunming (see Fechter 2007). In the course of my fieldwork I soon realized that spatial separation and social segregation from Chinese society is also an issue amongst expats in Kunming. The key to understanding them, however, are their motivations and reasons for migrating as well as well as the change in lifestyle that comes with settling in Kunming, usually described as positive and a means for self-realization and -development. These and other observations ultimately led me to the assumption that a large part of Kunming's expat population have more in common with so-called "lifestyle migrants" than with the popular images of expatriates.

"Whilst the lifestyle orientations and motivations of these migrants may differ, perhaps the one unifying factor of this group is their belief that a *change of residential place* will lead not simply to better opportunities in life, but rather to something which might be described as a better *lifestyle* and/or a more fulfilling way of life". (Torkington 2010:102)

The places lifestyle migrants choose to settle are considered to have considerable advantages compared to their home (country); these typically include: a lower cost of living, a more pleasant climate, a slower pace of life, a more sociable culture, more leisure as well as more opportunities for self-realization (O'Reilly 2007; Torkington 2010). As I have shown in Chapter 2, Kunming is generally considered to have these attributes and is thus often considered to be the best and most agreeable city in

China to live in. I have however also shown that these benefits alone are not sufficient to answer the first question raised on why Western foreigners choose to move to Kunming and stay there. While China's economic growth is regularly mentioned as a reason for moving and working there, the opportunities it entails are seldom the dominant motivation that leads expats to migrate to Kunming, but rather a means of justification. The underlying reasons that had essentially led them to leave their home countries to move to China, and eventually settle in Kunming are much more diverse. They are often connected with a certain discontentment of one's personal situation at home and a general disaffection of the home society. To fully understand the motivation of this move, it is therefore important to look at the reasons that initially led them to their decision to migrate, which often can be understood as a means of escape. Whereas for some expats the choice of China as migration destination was more or less a coincidence, others had moved there out of personal interest for the Chinese language and culture. Moving to Kunming was however in most cases a deliberate decision and was usually preceded by prior visits to the city and or social engagements with Kunming residents.

I have also demonstrated that the length of the stay and the contentment with it largely depends on the expatriates' age, occupation, as well as whether they are in a relationship with a local Chinese or not. Many expats, particularly young ones, already have more or less specific plans for leaving Kunming again in the near future. The desire to leave is partly provoked by the difficulty of obtaining jobs that correspond to their qualification, and partly by the challenges and limitations they experience in terms of social relationships and freedom. These experiences are significantly linked to the high degree of transiency characterizing the expat community.

The transient nature of the expats stay in Kunming plays a decisive role in answering the second research question of the expats interaction with the Chinese environment and their ways of integrating in it. The transiency is well reflected in its embedment within Chinese society and the readiness and ability of its members to socially and culturally integrate in it. Although most expats claim that they are integrated and often use this notion to distinguish themselves from other expats, integration is usually only partial and temporary. Their relationship with the Chinese environment is therefore in a constant state of flux, as they are regularly seeing the familiar shelter of the expat

community, often described as 'environmental bubble' (Fechter 2007). The concept of the 'environmental bubble', however suggests a complete spatial and social separation from the host environment. Since this does not apply to the expat community in Kunming, I have proposed the concept of 'gap' to describe their situation, since they are far away from their home countries and simultaneously lack permanent and full integration into Chinese society. This 'gap' finds its spatial manifestation in the expat areas (first and foremost in the area around Green Lake Park and *Wenlin Jie*), which also provides expats with a space in which they can develop a so-called 'third, transnational culture' – a hybrid mixture of both Western and Chinese cultural elements – as well as traditions and festivities specific to the expat community in Kunming.

The emergence of this 'transnational culture' can essentially be reduced to experiences of strangeness in the Chinese environment. These experiences are initially shaped by processes of becoming aware of one's own racial and cultural difference and the privileged position in Chinese society and are also reflected in the expats' attitudes towards the Chinese environment. While expatriates are willing to acknowledge the privileges that come with being 'white', those that can be reduced to cultural capital are more commonly tried to being justified by one's own competence and previous education. I have also noted that the working positions that expatriates obtain are highly racialized and lead to a certain occupational 'ghettoization'. The imitations felt in terms of career choices often cause young expats to feel "stuck" in Kunming and strengthen their desire to leave.

The results show that although the expats' decision of moving to Kunming is usually based on the expectation of a better *lifestyle*, it can often not be fulfilled. Thus causing one to wonder why they stay even though they obviously face a lot of difficulties? While Kunming's expats are largely in a position to leave in terms of financial means, one has to consider the other factors that might hinder them from leaving and may result in their feeling of "being stuck". It has also been shown that a growing number of expatriates no longer correspond with the dominant images as wealthy Westerners, who were sent abroad by their governments or companies and live in luxurious mansions completely separated from the local population. For a better understanding of these new kinds of expats, who share many characteristics with so-called *lifestyle migrants*, I suggest taking a closer look at the reasons that

initially led to their decision to leave home. This new form of expatriatism is no longer an opportunity given to the individual, but a conscious choice made by the individual with the incentive of a better way of life.

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## Online Resources

- [http://gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2220/yunnan\\_census\\_results\\_released](http://gokunming.com/en/blog/item/2220/yunnan_census_results_released) (accessed February 13, 2012)
- [www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/636/yunnans\\_ethnic\\_minorities\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the\\_qing\\_dynasty](http://www.gokunming.com/en/blog/item/636/yunnans_ethnic_minorities_at_the_end_of_the_qing_dynasty) (accessed on February 12,2012)
- <http://www.echinacities.com/kunming/business-guide/economic-overview/strategic-industries.html> (accessed January 13,2012)
- [http://en.kunming.cn/index/content/2011-05/10/content\\_2520991.htm](http://en.kunming.cn/index/content/2011-05/10/content_2520991.htm) (accessed February 13,2012)
- [http://gokunming.com/en/forums/thread/2887/expat\\_population\\_in\\_kunming](http://gokunming.com/en/forums/thread/2887/expat_population_in_kunming) (accessed January 14,2012)
- <http://www.subways.net/china/kunming.htm> (accessed February 13,2013)
- <http://www.echinacities.com/kunming/business-guide/economic-overview/foreign-trade-foreign-direct.html> (accessed January 13,2012)

## Interviews

Katja, 19.08.2011, my apartment, Kunming

Gabriel, 22.08.2011, The Box, Kunming

Francesca, 25.08.2011, The Box, Kunming

Alex and Nena, 27.08.2011, their apartment, Kunming

Steve, 01.09.2011, French Café, Kunming

Dave, 22.10.2011, Salvador's Coffee House, Kunming

Joost, 26.10.2011, Moondog, Kunming

Jeremy, 03.11.2011, Prague Café, Kunming

Peter, 03.11.2011, Prague Café, Kunming

## Abstract (Deutsch)

Die zunehmend flexible Mobilität unserer Zeit führt dazu, dass immer mehr Menschen aus dem Westen beschließen, auszuwandern. In Aussicht auf eine Verbesserung der eigenen Lebensumstände und Möglichkeiten der Selbstverwirklichung verschwimmen die Grenzen zwischen Migration und Tourismus. Dies beeinflusst natürlich auch das vorherrschende Verständnis und Selbstverständnis von *expatriate* als Personen, welche von westlichen Unternehmen oder Regierungen in weniger wohlhabende Länder entsandt werden und in luxuriösen Anwesen, abgeschottet von der Mehrheitsgesellschaft, leben. Ausgehend von einer ethnographischen Untersuchung westlicher Ausländer in Kunming (Yunnan, Volksrepublik China), betrachtet die vorliegende Arbeit diese neue Art des *expats* in Einbezug von Theorien zum Thema *Lifestyle Migration*.

Das zentrale Erkenntnisinteresse der Studie stellt die Frage dar, warum diese *expats* sich entschlossen haben, sowohl (zeitweise) nach Kunming zu ziehen als auch etwaige Ursachen, von dort wieder weg zu ziehen. Um diese Frage zu beantworten, wird ein genauer Blick auf die Gründe und Motivationen gerichtet, welche sie anfangs dazu bewegt haben, ihre Heimatländer zu verlassen. Des Weiteren werden die Herausforderungen und Hürden, denen sich die *expats* in ihrem neuen Zuhause gegenüber sehen, erörtert. Daraus ergibt sich die Frage nach der Erfüllung der anfänglichen Erwartungen und weshalb die meisten trotz Enttäuschungen bleiben. Für ein umfassenderes Verständnis setzt sich die vorliegende Studie zudem mit den Dynamiken innerhalb der *expat community* der Auswanderer auseinander. Dabei beleuchtet die Arbeit den höchst flüchtigen Charakter dieser *community* und erkundet die Art und Weise, in der Kunmings Einwanderer mit der chinesischen Umwelt interagieren und sich kulturell und sozial integrieren. Die Beziehung zwischen *expats* und der lokalen Bevölkerung werden unter Einbezug theoretischer Überlegungen zu "kulturellem Kapital" und "*whiteness*" genauer erläutert. Diese weisen den Migranten einerseits eine privilegierte Stellung innerhalb der Mehrheitsgesellschaft zu, während sie andererseits in bestimmte Jobnischen gedrängt werden, deren Zugang fast ausschließlich auf Hautfarbe und Nationalität basiert.



## Abstract (English)

Due to an increasing flexibility in movement, a growing number of Western people make a decision to migrate based on the prospect of an improvement in lifestyle and the opportunity for self-fulfillment, blurring the distinction between migration and tourism. This expands on the dominant understanding of expats as being people sent to less affluent countries by Western companies or governments and living in luxurious mansions isolated from the host society. Based on ethnographic research amongst Western foreigners in Kunming (Yunnan, P.R. China), the present thesis looks at this new type of expat through the lens of lifestyle migration. The focus of the study lies on question of why these expats decided to (temporarily) move to Kunming as well as why they might wish to leave. In order to answer this question a close look will be taken at the reasons and motivations that have led them to leave their home countries in the first place, as well as the challenges and restrictions they face in their new place of home. For a better comprehension, this study also deals with the dynamics within the expat community, highlighting its transient nature and further exploring the ways in which Kunming's expats interact with the Chinese environment, as well as how they integrate both culturally and socially. This is explained by drawing on theories regarding 'cultural capital' and 'whiteness', that on one hand identify their privileged position with their host society, whilst on the other reveal that the jobs they are able to obtain are limited and highly racialized.



## Curriculum Vitae

Name: Hannah Klepeis  
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### Education

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|                   |                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10/2006 – 06/2012 | Cultural and Social Anthropology, University of Vienna<br>Elective Subjects: Sinology, International Development |
| 09/2011 – 11/2011 | Thesis Fieldwork in Kunming, Yunnan, P.R. China                                                                  |
| 09/2009 – 10/2010 | Chinese Language Course, Yunnan University, Kunming, Yunnan, P.R. China                                          |
| 07/2008 – 08/2008 | Summer School, Shaoxing University, Shaoxing, Zhejiang, P.R. China                                               |
| 09/1998 – 06/2006 | Bundesgymnasium Kurzwiese, Eisenstadt                                                                            |
| 07/2003 – 06/2004 | Year Abroad, Northcote College, Auckland, New Zealand                                                            |
| 09/1994 – 06/1998 | Volkschule (Primary School) Eisenstadt                                                                           |

### Work Experience

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|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 02/2012 - Present                      | Computer Room Supervisor, Vienna University Computer Center, Vienna        |
| 11/2011 - Present                      | Independent Employee, Austria Presse Agentur Mediawatch GmbH, Vienna       |
| 01/2011 – 06/2011                      | Sales Advisor, Hennes & Mauritz GesmbH, Vienna                             |
| 03/2011 – 06/2011<br>03/2009 – 07/2009 | Intern, Ö.G.C.F. – Österreichische Gesellschaft für Chinaforschung, Vienna |
| 08/2008 – 11/2008<br>07/2007 – 11/2007 | Exhibition Supervisor, Esterházy Privatstiftung, Eisenstadt                |

### Languages

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German, English (fluent), Chinese (good), French (beginner), Tibetan (beginner)

